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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

I have attempted to find out what was of significance in the sphere of religion in Charlotte Brontë's life and thought. For information on this I have concentrated on a study of her better known novels, her letters and the contacts she had through family and friends.

Naturally of importance was her up-bringing in an Evangelical Anglican household. But at the same time, she had a father, who though orthodox in his theology was unorthodox in his views on child-rearing. The mental freedom this gave her was important. Her education, though far from conventional, was such as stimulated and invigorated her imagination. Her natural inclinations and independence of thought, enabled her to use this freedom.

Her letters are revealing of a person capable of passionate feelings and strong emotions. But these she was only able to give open expression to in her novels. This was undoubtedly what contributed to their lasting appeal.

In delving into these personal responses it has been possible to throw an interesting light on religious thinking in sections of nineteenth-century church life, particularly on the contentions and divergencies within the Evangelical and Catholic wings of the Anglican church.

This has in turn shown how, leading an isolated life in an isolated part of the world does not exclude Charlotte Brontë from absorbing and reflecting currents of religious thought that were strong at that time. To give background to all this, it seemed helpful to introduce the whole subject by a brief outline of what those main strands of thought were, both Protestant and Catholic. This, in turn, led to a consideration of the changes

that had taken place during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries not only in Anglicanism, but in Catholicism and Methodism.

In summing up, it was interesting to trace Charlotte Brontë's changing attitudes; how she responded to new ideas and controversies as her literary reputation grew and her horizons expanded.

What remains after all this sifting of ideas is the conviction that over and above all the outside influences there is always the indefinable factor, the spark of genius.

UNRESTRICTED

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I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my friend June Cadogan, without whose patience and typing skills the work could not have been completed.

And above all I wish to thank my family - including my late husband Gwynne Ivor Jones, whose encouragement and support were invaluable - and my daughters, Elizabeth and Anne, and my son, David, who have cheerfully assisted me in many differing ways.

ABBREVIATIONS

- LL Clement K Shorter, *The Brontës, Life and Letters*
Volumes I and II (London 1969)
- ECG E. G. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*
(London 1908)
- L and D J. Lock and W. T. Dixon, *A Man of Sorrows, The Life,
Letters and Times of the Reverend Patrick Brontë*
(London 1965)
- HMC *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*
edited by R. Davies, A. Raymond George and G. Rupp
Volumes I - IV (London 1965, 1966 - 88)
- JJW *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley* ed. by
N. Curnock Volumes 1 to 8 (London 1938 Bi-centenary issue)
- RVB *Religion in Victorian Britain*
Volume I *Traditions* ed. by G. Parsons
Volume II *Controversies* ed. by G. Parsons
Volume III *Sources* ed. by J. R. Moore
Volume IV *Interpretations* ed. by G. Parsons
(Milton Keynes 1988)
- DWB D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*
(London 1989)
- JB John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850*
(London 1975)
- BST *Brontë Society Transactions*
Brontë Parsonage, Haworth, Keighley, West Yorkshire.

References to the three major novels of Charlotte Brontë are inserted in the text.
The editions used are :-

- Jane Eyre* (JE) ed. by Jane Jack and Margaret Smith
(Clarendon Press, Oxford - 1969)
- Shirley* (S.) ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith
(Clarendon Press, Oxford - 1979)
- Villette* (V.) ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith
(Clarendon Press, Oxford - 1984)

CHAPTER ONE: THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

In attempting to make an assessment of the importance in Charlotte Brontë's life of her religious beliefs, there are certain factors that are of prime importance. There is the time in which she was born, a time of change in the social and political arena; of new ideas in the realms of science; and of new conflicts and changing loyalties within the area of religious thought. But of all the factors possibly her family and upbringing was the most crucial. She was the daughter of the Parsonage. Her father was a convinced Evangelical, but with strong Methodist roots; he had a Methodist wife and Methodist friends. Her own circle of friends, in early life, confined as it was, just confirmed this. Secondly, her place of upbringing was the wild isolated independence of a Yorkshire village. Thirdly, her educational experiences were unusual; the "home" education of an idiosyncratic but intellectually alert father; an equally idiosyncratic aunt; then the unhappy episode, so well-documented, in Cowan Bridge; and, finally, the happier atmosphere of Roe Head with teachers and friends providing a quiet yet basically devout atmosphere.

In her early adult years she faced unhappy experiences as a governess in situations that did not fulfil her ambition or her search for identity. Only the demanding and intellectually stimulating years in Brussels under a teacher of extraordinary enlightenment did that.

Then we come to the period of her life when the walls close in again and the family face their troubles together. The writing that had absorbed her in her childhood years now becomes the principal occupation. This took Charlotte Brontë into a wider circle, a new world. In her writing and in her contacts with her new friends, she found

new worlds to explore. During her stay in Brussels she had had to encounter the full force of continental Catholicism. Then in her excursions to London she came into contact with the new intellectuals who were questioning the traditions of Anglicanism, and even the accepted dogmas of the Christian faith. The closed world of Haworth Parsonage was challenged.

And imperceptibly as the condition of her life and her thinking make her look outward she accepted with gratitude the companionship and affection which Mr Nicholls has been faithfully offering for years, and her life ended on a quiet note of contentment - even if that contentment is cut tragically short.

To take the first of these factors - the Parsonage. It was into the Church of England that Charlotte Brontë was born and baptized in June 1816. What was this Church like in the early years of the nineteenth century?

Throughout the eighteenth century it was a church in which reason was in control. "Enthusiasm" was decried as fanaticism but already the tide was turning. In 1738 John Wesley with his "heart strangely warmed" began his fiery preaching up and down the country. Though he was to be the inspiration for many changes within the Anglican Church, he himself remained a faithful member of the Established Church to the day he died. The "Evangel" that he proclaimed was shared by many of his fellow Anglican priests - names that were to echo powerfully within the walls of Haworth Parsonage; for example, William Grimshaw, Patrick Brontë's famous predecessor in the living at Haworth; Charles Simeon, the dynamic Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, whose teaching had such a profound effect upon a whole generation of students, Patrick Brontë amongst them.

Elisabeth Jay maintains that Anglican Evangelicalism was an offshoot from the work of the Methodist leaders John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield.¹

The close interconnection with Methodism is certainly endorsed in the annals of the Brontë family. The break between Anglican Evangelicalism and Wesleyan Methodism had come about late in the eighteenth century, and was resisted with sadness by John Wesley himself. It was the result of Church "politics" rather than doctrinal conviction. For John Wesley was faced with the necessity of consecrating bishops who would then be equipped to ordain ministers to spread the gospel in America; this was to him of prime importance. Patrick Brontë would later share that enthusiasm for preaching the word.

There is no doubt that the soul-searching that preceded the experience in that room in Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738, epitomises the evangelical experience generally, and Charlotte Brontë may have laughed at such foolish "mummeries" but the inner turbulence felt coloured her experience too. She may have ridiculed the undisciplined enthusiasm shown by the congregation of Briar Chapel in chapter 9 of *Shirley*. But when she needs emotionally charged language to describe Caroline's state of mind during her illness, she is obviously using the tones of the more impassioned utterances of Wesley's followers.

John Wesley had started his soul-searching during his undergraduate days in Oxford when with his brother Charles he formed the "Holy Club", devoting himself to a regular programme of Church attendance, Bible study and good works. Yet he was conscious only of failure. When his religious search took him to missionary work in Georgia he realised how far he was from an answer. "I went to America to convert the

heathen, but oh! who shall convert me", he writes in his Journal. ² The turning-point came when he was wrestling with St Paul's Letter to the Romans, and the profound theological tension of faith and works, a tension that was the lynch-pin of Reformation doctrine. And the Evangelical experience is nowhere so vividly given expression as in his account of that evening in May :-

I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. ³

From then on through his long life, and through the length and breadth of the British Isles, he carried the Gospel message. As he travelled he built up a band of followers, training and teaching them in their class meetings, giving them cohesion and organisational support in their Societies and "bands". These Societies were strengthened by cottage meetings where Churches either did not exist or were not available. Such meetings would have been familiar to Patrick Brontë's parishioners as part of the legacy of William Grimshaw's ministry. Their theological certainties were given voice in his brother Charles's hymns, and these, with rousing tunes, were an important element in the appeal made by the movement.

But the originator of this Methodist Revival, according to Rupert Davies, was neither John nor Charles Wesley but George Whitefield, also an ordained priest in the Church of England, who had undergone an experience which he described as a "new birth".⁴ He too had laboured in the colony in Georgia, and on his return began

preaching in the open air, on the maxim: "Go not to those who want you, but to those who want you most", he was moved by the needs of the Kingswood Colliers outside Bristol.⁵ He asked for Wesley's help, and so began Wesley's open-air preaching.

It was such departures from the normal practices of the Church of England that caused tensions to build up between the Church authorities and John Wesley. In theology, his firm stand on justification by faith and assurance of personal salvation, he was at one with the orthodoxy of the Established Church, and his

zealous preaching with a gay almost Franciscan optimism, praying, preaching and singing with fervour, could set villages ablaze, and, with a Gospel of forgiveness, could reach men and women.⁶

It was only the over-riding demands of the need to preach the Gospel that made John Wesley in 1784 take the decisive step of ordaining Whatcoat, Vasey and Coke for their work of spreading the Word in America. He may have been an Anglican and a traditionalist but "he set loyalty to the Scripture and the salvation of man" above these things.⁷ After his death this Plan of Pacification in 1795 went further, with the consent of Conference, the Lord's Supper might be administered by "travelling preachers in full connexion".⁸ But in practice for many years it was accepted that "The Lord's Supper shall never be administered on those Sundays on which it is administered in the Parish Church".⁹

John Wesley himself had taken great care not to impinge on this order and pattern of church services. His preaching time-table was arranged to fit in with parish practices. He was on several occasions invited to Haworth by the incumbent, the Reverend William Grimshaw. There we read of platforms being erected for him so that

if the congregation was too large to be contained within the church, the "overflow" could hear him in the churchyard. We read in the *Journals* several entries like this :

A December storm met us upon the mountain, but this did not hinder such a congregation as the church could not contain. I suppose we had near on one thousand communicants, and scarce a trifler among them.

May 22nd 1757

The Church could not contain the people who came. Mr Grimshaw had provided for this by fixing a scaffold on the outside of one of the windows, through which I went after prayers and people likewise all went out into the Churchyard.

July 12th 1761 ¹⁰

These stirring services must have remained with the Haworth residents as an abiding memory, something of which they could be proud. And proud they were too, of William Grimshaw, as John Wesley had said of him :-

He was beloved by everyone in his parish who, whether they would be persuaded by him to forsake the evil of their ways or no, had no doubt that Mr Grimshaw was their cordial friend. ¹¹

He preached to them in "market language", the language easily understood by all his congregation. Patrick Brontë was to follow this pattern. His extempore style of preaching in simple language, without notes, helped to keep the memory of Grimshaw alive in Haworth.

Such a warm welcome from William Grimshaw was Evangelicalism in the Anglican Church at its most positive. Not all the parish clergy were as accommodating. And the Evangelicalism they shared was based according to D. W. Bebbington on four defining characteristics: conversionism, activism, biblicism

and crucicentrism.¹² The method of conversion was preaching. Charles Simeon, for example, a leading Evangelical, had a profound effect on his students in Cambridge. Patrick Brontë was one of them. Charlotte Brontë years later was to thank her friend Ellen Nussey for promising to lend her father a copy of the sermons of Charles Simeon, knowing how he would enjoy it.¹³

Justification by faith - that salvation could be received and not earned - was the "motor of expansion". It was justification by faith alone and not by any good works. Yet it was accompanied by personal assurance of salvation which overflowed into good works, into teaching, into sick visiting and later into missionary expansion overseas. And Simeon, with his sympathy with his students and his powerful connections, did his best for them by sponsoring their applications for vacant parishes.

To the Evangelical, the Bible was the source of inspiration, the repository of all spiritual truth, to be used and studied devotionally. As Simeon said to his students: "Be Bible Christians, not system Christians".¹⁴

Patrick Brontë must indeed have been a "Bible Christian" and passed on his vast knowledge to his daughter. For Charlotte Brontë's novels abound in Biblical references often so obscure as to give strong evidence for a knowledge of the Bible that was profound and extensive. References are embedded in the text; references that today are obscure to the average reader. For instance, Shirley's face is "as inscrutable as the writing on the wall to Belshazzar"(S.6211); an image which is then further developed by reference to Daniel and the difficulty in translating the cryptic writing.¹⁵

In the realms of the theology of the Atonement, Evangelicals were convinced of its centrality, but divided on interpretation. Some had Calvinist leanings; the majority were Arminian. Both were concerned to reconcile the sovereignty of God with the freedom of man's will. The Calvinist could envisage that a man by his wrong choices could bring upon himself eternal punishment. This fear in his early days made William Grimshaw harsh with himself and a stern pastor among his flock. The Arminian, on the other hand, remained convinced that, as Christ died for all, all were ultimately assured of salvation. Hence the more joyous tone in their words and worship. There is just a possibility that such topics were not far away from the spiritual arguments between Patrick Brontë and his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Branwell. Ellen Nussey mentioned in her letters that Aunt Branwell would "tilt arguments against Mr Brontë without fear".¹⁶ There is a sufficient hint in Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* of Calvinist determinism. Could Aunt Branwell have retained some Calvinist certainties which influenced the baby Anne for whom she was responsible? Winifred Gerin implies in her biography of Anne Brontë that Anne's leanings in that direction were a result of her close association with Aunt Branwell in her early years. But no confirmation of this can be traced elsewhere.¹⁷

Certainly it would seem Emily had encountered Calvinist attitudes. In *Wuthering Heights* she takes Calvin's stress on sin and judgement and makes of it the stuff of dark comedy in the scene of Lockwood's nightmare in Cathy's room. As in all dreams distortion and exaggeration are intermingled with fact. The seventy-times-seven of the biblical passage on forgiveness (Matthew 18:22) becomes in Jabez Branderham's interminable sermon the "four hundred and ninety parts". The tapping

on the window of Cathy's room becomes the loud tapping sound he makes in his enthusiasm on the sounding-board of his three-decker pulpit (such a pulpit as still actually existed in Haworth Church).¹⁸

Undoubtedly, the Reformed tradition with its roots in the Puritan revolution of the seventeenth century was still strong. The Calvinist doctrine of the predestination of the elect and its total reliance on divine grace, could be seen to offer bleak comfort to some. To reassure themselves they maintained that saving faith could be temporary; it did not necessarily include assurance. The necessity, therefore, to scrutinize himself "Keeps a man in work all his days".¹⁹ This need for a checklist to distinguish between sanctifying and what was seen as temporary grace certainly kept William Grimshaw busy before his conversion. John Wesley, on the same search, was convinced that assurance was a necessary part of justifying faith; but it was also "a distinct gift", a "common privilege of the children of God".²⁰

The swing to the dynamic of the more Arminian tone of salvation for all, in words such as Charles Wesley's

Thy sovereign grace to all extends immense and unconfined²¹

engendered a confidence and an optimism that was reflected in Evangelical fervour. John Wesley's field preaching was a response to what he felt was a necessity: like Paul's "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel". Charles Simeon encouraged the building of Churches which should be functional, cheap, with no obstacles to clear vision,² designed for preaching. With so urgent a need for preachers, laymen were called on for help. In 1836 the Church Pastoral Aid Society was formed "to support lay parish workers as much as additional parish clergy".²² Even female preachers were used especially by the Primitive Methodists.

The shared experience in both Methodism and Anglican Evangelicalism prompted also greater social commitment. In areas of public concern such as the abolition of slavery, one of the moving forces was Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. Their Evangelical convictions gave dynamism to their public office. Here Evangelicals came closer to their dissenting brethren. But the Evangelical branch of the Church of England, and Wesleyan Methodists, while convinced of the necessity for social involvement were fearful of being accused of the radicalism of dissenters. Patrick Brontë's staunch Toryism was typical.

Patrick Brontë, for example, upheld Tory views on franchise reform. At a meeting of the Reform Bill agitators he argued, as all true blue Tories did, that the working classes had no right to franchise because they were uneducated. But, on the other hand, he would plead the cause of the poor themselves; and he argued passionately for better housing, a better water supply and all the measures necessary for combating cholera.²³

On liturgical matters the Evangelicals were uncompromising. They were accused by their High Church colleagues of undervaluing liturgical practices. Yet it is interesting to note that when the Reverend A. B. Nicholls decided he must leave Haworth because of Patrick Brontë's opposition to his marriage to Charlotte, one of the last services he conducted was the Communion Service. This was obviously an addition to the normal service of Evening Prayer. In a letter, Charlotte Brontë wrote :-

Having ventured on Whit Sunday to stop to the Sacrament....²⁴

For Evangelicals did attach considerable importance to the sacrament and would therefore want to make Holy Communion ~~as~~ available to as many people as possible. Those in domestic service, for example, would find it easier to come to church in the evening rather than mid-morning.²⁵

Then there was the Gorham Case when in 1847 the Bishop of Exeter refused to ratify the appointment of the Reverend George Gorham to a living because of what he regarded as his inadequate views on baptism. The teaching of the Book of Common Prayer on the doctrine of baptismal regeneration was interpreted differently by Evangelicals and High Churchmen. The latter laid stress on the efficacy of the sacramental act itself, and the Evangelicals on the prime necessity for the accompanying gift of grace. The provincial ecclesiastical court judgment was given against Gorham; but the Privy Council to whom he appealed, ruled in his favour. Feelings ran high. It was widely debated throughout the country for the next three years. It is interesting to read in a lively letter Charlotte Brontë's friend Ellen Nussey received from their friend Mary Taylor in Australia, her comments on the matter :-

I imagine that Miss Gorham must be the daughter of the Reverend G Gorham who is having such a quarrel with the Bishop of Exeter. Which, of course, I highly approve of though I don't know what it's all about.²⁶

To the High Church Anglicans the outward and visible signs of the sacrament were central to an understanding of the inward and spiritual grace. The authority of the church in these matters was vested in its ministry and its sacraments. The Evangelicals stressed rather the all-importance of personal conversion and the reliance on Holy Scripture as the sole authority.

Vestments, too, were a thorny subject - particularly the question of the use of the surplice. The custom was to assume the black Geneva preaching gown for delivering the sermon. The surplice, with its greater sacramental significance, was resumed afterwards, when once more the preacher spoke with the authority of the Church. So fervent were some responses to this matter that there were actual "surplice riots" in

1845 and 1849 in the Exeter diocese. To those with High Church affinities, preaching in the surplice signified a submission to the authority of the church. Such submission to the Evangelicals suggested leanings towards Rome; they stuck firmly to the practice of preaching in the gown. So when Charlotte Brontë mentioned the surplice "in that long night-gown" in the opening pages of *Shirley*, she was writing about what was a burning issue of the time.

Feelings grew stronger and tensions greater as the Oxford Movement within the Church of England gained support. As Bebbington points out in his section on High Churchmanship, a new sense of corporate solidarity, of concentration on ecclesiastical tradition was growing among leading Churchmen, to combat what they saw as the liberalism and individualism that the Evangelical Movement engendered.²⁷ Authority within the Church was being threatened, so were order and discipline in liturgical matters. To counteract this, therefore, the Tractarians stressed that value was to be placed on observing the Church Year, on historical awareness; beauty and order were to be restored in music, vestments, colour, Church architecture. Preaching was to be given second place; the Sacraments were of supreme importance.

Tensions inevitably developed. Such intense feelings, for example, were aroused by the Gorham Judgment between 1847 and 1850 that two hundred pamphlets were written in one year. Charlotte Brontë had to confront these tensions in her daily life. The curates who now became part of the Haworth scene tended to belong to the High Church wing of Anglicanism. This was certainly true of the Reverend A. B. Nicholls, who was an avowed Puseyite.

It was an unhappy fact for Patrick Brontë that even with help from the Evangelical Pastoral Aid Society, he rarely received an Evangelical assistant; this man Nicholls was a positive Puseyite.²⁸

Why a Society which aimed at supporting Protestant and Evangelical doctrine should choose him as an assistant to an avowed Evangelical like Mr Brontë is puzzling. Yet there is no evidence that he imposed his High Church views upon Mr Brontë or the congregation, or that he changed his own views.

Such tensions as did arise were basically caused by a deep-seated antagonism to Roman Catholicism, inherited from the stormy days of the reign of Mary Tudor and the memories of the bloody persecutions recorded for all time in Foxe's *Booke of Martyrs*. To many this Anglo-Catholicism was in reality a leaning to Rome - an entry by the back door. And Rome appeared devious, oppressive, riddled with superstition and stifling to intellectual inquiry of any kind.

In actual fact the English type of Roman Catholicism encountered in the early years of the century was far more influenced by Challoner's *Garden of the Soul*, engendering a devotion that was meditative, reflective and emotionally restrained. The tone was pietistic; the quest for holiness similar to that in Evangelicalism; it encouraged a style of worship that was experiential and emotional. The sense of mission turned to popular preaching as its main medium. As Edward Norman points out, the eighteenth-century Catholic Church, cut off from European Catholicism, had features in common with Protestantism; for example, the new Catholic Churches often resembled dissenting chapels architecturally.²⁹ There was antipathy to devotional practices that appeared superstitious. The prayers were in English. Even the clergy adopted clerical dress similar to the sober dress of the dissenting minister. It was not an underground

religion any more, but an emerging Church, quietly recovering, and Catholics and Protestants co-existed easily enough. Connolly claims that this steadily reviving church was being absorbed into English life as another variety of religious non-conformity.³⁰

But by the mid-century, change was rapid. The Test and Corporation Acts of 1828 made concessions to the Protestant dissenters. This was closely followed by the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. A new confident mood surged through Catholic ranks. Added to this was the influx of Irish immigrants. Their type of Catholicism may have been flavoured with folk religion; but they needed pastors, churches, schools. All these changes were seized on by the Ultramontane enthusiasts as a new field of mission; and as always, leaders came forward to meet the needs; Wiseman for example helped prepare the ground for the Papal Aggression in 1850. The Catholic Hierarchy had been restored in Britain in September 1850, so that when Charlotte Brontë came to write *Villette* in 1851, the mood of antagonism was at its height. As Marion J. Phillips makes clear :-

Her attack upon Roman Catholic clergy is often even more virulent because she believed that the Roman Catholic Church deliberately incorporated in its powerful institution a definition of priesthood, which, from her strong Protestant standpoint constituted.....extreme abuse of it.³¹

For a real understanding of both the novel and Charlotte Brontë's attitude revealed within it, it is necessary to establish exactly what led up to this move in the Catholic Church in 1850.

During that period, as Bossy points out, the Catholic community was undergoing a radical transformation; numbers had multiplied ten times; local distribution transformed - for example, it implanted itself in parts of the country barren of

Catholics, such as the industrial belt of the West Riding of Yorkshire.³²

The "restoration" aimed at restoring the authority of the bishops over the clergy. This was done by instituting a diocesan episcopate. The Vicars Apostolic were now given assigned English sees. Cardinal Wiseman was appointed Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, with twelve suffragan bishops assisting him. Bossy suggests that it can be seen as bringing to a close the history of a sect and the inauguration of a denomination. In other words, it was a "conclusion" as well as a "beginning".³³

The "conclusion" was of the period since the Reformation. After the Reformation, English Catholicism had survived the period of turmoil of Edward and Elizabeth's reigns; had quietly served its separate communities, and had during the later eighteenth century shown an increasing strength and vitality; a growing self-confidence that struggled for political and civil power and finally achieved it.

Bossy argues that this community ought properly to be considered as a branch of the English non-conforming tradition. The Royal Supremacy of the Reformed Church laid such stress on what was to Catholics "an affront to the high ideal of the clerical vocation".³⁴ For in Catholic eyes "the clerical caste" should be concerned with "the primacy of the spiritual", with reformation of behaviour, and interior conversion. The acts they were called upon to perform were related to the Church, not the State; they were "religious, sacramental acts" performed as members of a small non-conforming community.

This small community tended to be centred on the household of the local gentry. The landowning classes afforded the continuity the Catholic congregation needed. Sometimes the priests, in short supply, were peripatetic, travelling from house to house on horseback. This pattern, plus the holding of "cottage meetings" where the priest was unavailable, echo the habits of eighteenth century Methodist preachers. These "services of prayer", too, came nearest to the extemporary prayer of some Protestant churches. In this way, the two "non-conforming" sects had much in common.

Being a minority group presented other difficulties that these Catholics and dissenters shared also. The Statutes of William and Mary had required incumbents to enter in a separate register the births of dissenters' children.³⁵ These instructions seem to have included those of Catholics. So, too, with burials. These had to be in parish churchyards. But it was common for a Catholic to be buried at night.

The liturgical side of Catholic devotion may have been circumscribed, but the devotional side was healthy enough. Challoner's *Garden of the Soul* published in 1740 is proof of this. It provided instruction; exposition of scriptural passages and of Christian doctrine. But above all it aimed to assist the individual in his devotional life, through the exercise of mental prayer. The practice of the presence of God, and the meditation on books of devotion such as *The Imitation of Christ* were an accepted part of Catholic discipline.

By the end of the eighteenth century there was a greatly increased mood of confidence among Catholics. Not only had they maintained their numbers, but had increased them. The demand for civil and political recognition was louder after 1791

with Pitt's Relief Bill which brought some religious toleration to Catholics. By 1829 the self-confidence was justified when with the Catholic Emancipation Act most offices were thrown open to them.

But there were other factors at work which accelerated change, greatly increased Catholic power and equally increased opposition to Catholicism. The first of these factors was the growing strength of Evangelicalism and the multiplication of dissenting Protestant sects. This was Protestantism on the march, but not always in step. However, to struggling Catholic congregations it presented a challenge. Battle lines were drawn. The second factor was the enormous influx of Irish immigrants. This had begun to increase in the 1820's and 1830's, but became much greater in the 1840's. Most of them were fleeing from the poverty of their existence. They were "cradle" Catholics whose Catholicism was part and parcel of their whole life and culture. But it was not an informed Catholicism and again presented a challenge to a Church already severely short of manpower. The third factor was a strange and unexpected one - an unusual number of converts from the Church of England to the Church of Rome. They may have been small in numbers, at most two thousand, but were certainly important in terms of influence. Many of them were men of great intelligence and deep spirituality, like Newman, Faber and Ward; for them the Evangelical pattern of worship and devotion seemed to lack historical roots and ritual boundaries. What they were searching for they found in Rome.

The authorities in Rome were not slow to take advantage of the situation. Since the seventeenth century, the Roman Catholic Church of England had been in the hands of Vicars Apostolic under the direct authority of the Congregation of Propaganda

in Rome. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Catholics appealed to Rome to restore the Hierarchy of Bishops. In 1837 they approached Pope Gregory XVI. In 1847 Pope Pius IX agreed to their request. They had a man available, ready and willing to carry the banner for Ultramontane rituals and practices. The moment of enthusiasm was seized and the Hierarchy restored on September 29, 1850, with Nicholas Wiseman as Archbishop of Westminster.

But if Catholics felt they had "arrived", Protestants were equally vocal in opposition, and it is this opposition we hear in *Villette*. Mutual toleration between Catholic and Protestant was hard to find. Charlotte Brontë was not alone in the strength of her feelings. *The Times* for October 14, 1850, showed "an intemperate display of no-popery rhetoric".³⁶ The whole country was said to be on the boil on the subject. On his triumphal journey back from Rome Cardinal Wiseman seemed unaware of the effect of his florid cadences and extravagant language. His Pastoral Letter of October 17th did not soothe matters; he spoke in unequivocal terms of Catholic England. This tactless letter only stirred English fears of Romish plots and of foreign influence. The Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, indicated that he agreed with Bishop Maltby of Durham that the aggression of the Pope was "insolent and insidious".³⁷

As E. R. Norman makes clear, it was the claim to jurisdiction in England with the implication that such jurisdiction could include temporal power, which alarmed the ordinary people of England. The Pope and Wiseman were burned in effigy, and "small boys scrawled 'No Popery' on the flagstones".³⁸

The language of debate on both sides could be very strong. James Begg, a Scottish Free Church Minister, in an article on the conversion of Romanists in 1852 speaks of using all scriptural means to expose and arrest the progress of "this gigantic evil, and actually rescue the enslaved victims". He talks of "the lying delusions of Anti-Christ" and claims that "the Word of God is still a fire and a hammer to break this rock in pieces".³⁹

Patrick Brontë's determination that his family should be abreast of affairs in the outside world, and his love of debate, would have ensured that Charlotte Brontë's mind was trained and prepared for discussion and analysis of just such controversial questions as this. Winifred Gerin records Charlotte's writing even at the age of twelve on this issue :

Of those three months from the time of the King's speech to the end nobody could think speak or write of anything but the Catholic question.⁴⁰

But there were other ideas that were causing controversy and heart-searching in intellectual circles. Apart from the swing to authority and tradition evident in the Catholic Church, there was the swing to liberalism and free thinking leading in many cases to agnosticism. We are moving into the era when the giants of science were causing ferment not only within their own disciplines, but throughout the academic world and beyond. Incidentally, those "giants" themselves were often ambivalent. Darwin throughout his life wrestled with the religious doubts engendered by his evolutionary theories, troubled chiefly by the upset it would cause his devout wife Emma. He assured a critic that he had never been an atheist in the sense of denying

the existence of God. As his biographer puts it: "he had been hand in glove with Christians all his life".⁴¹ But in private the tensions remained.

Soon after mid-century, the powerful contenders in *Essays and Reviews* would take centre stage. For even the Bible was receiving scientific treatment. Biblical criticism was stirring in unexpected quarters. *The Life of Jesus* - critically examined - by E. F. Strauss was translated in 1846 by George Eliot. Few books have had a more profound influence on religious thought. There is no recorded evidence that Charlotte Brontë read it, but with many shared contacts it is hard to believe she was not conscious of its appearance. George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë shared so many concerns, ranging from susceptibility to sick headaches, dutiful care of an ageing father, to the admiration of the French novels of George Sand. They both had a strict Evangelical upbringing, but escaped from any narrow rigidity, and were open to new influences. George Eliot was obviously drawn to Currer Bell. She may have criticized *Jane Eyre*; she comments on reading it:-

All self-sacrifice is good; but one would like it to be in a somewhat nobler cause than that of a diabolical law which chains a man..... to a putrefying carcase⁴²

But she loved *Villette* and draws attention to the new cheap edition :+

Which we would rather read for the third time than most new novels for the first time.⁴³

After all, they shared so much; they were both women writers in a man's world, who dared to write what was for them the truth. But where George Eliot's questioning mind led her to leave her Evangelical roots and become an out-spoken agnostic, Charlotte

Brontë clung to her childhood faith, while at the same time showing an increased readiness to explore new trends of thought. Outgrowing one's early certainties and wrestling with religious belief is a slow process. George Eliot was given time.

Charlotte Brontë was not. It is interesting to speculate how her religious beliefs and loyalties might have been modified if she had survived to meet the intellectual challenges presented in the 1860's by *Essays and Reviews*, and Darwin, Huxley and the other scientists and philosophers. By that time "ventures into theological liberalism" had ceased to be "isolated individual affairs".⁴⁴ Would her growing stature in literary circles have ensured she met, as George Eliot did, other liberal minds whose new ventures in religious and philosophical thought could have moulded hers? Her contact with G. H. Lewes and James Martineau could have brought her within the *Westminster Review* circle, for example. Certainly her breadth of vision was sufficient to enable her to admire and esteem another agnostic, Harriet Martineau, even while she could not agree with her views. But her reactions to Martineau's writing on atheism are unequivocal, balanced but definite :-

It is the first exposition of avowed atheism and materialism I have ever read; the first....declaration of disbelief in the existence of God or a future life, I have ever seen.... One would wish to consider such an exposition in an impartial spirit.... This I find difficult to do. The strangest thing is that we are called on to rejoice over this hopeless blank....to welcome this unutterable desolation as a state of pleasant freedom... Who would do this if he could? For my own part, I wish to find and know the Truth, but if this be Truth well may she guard herself with a veil.⁴⁵

Her mind was open, her critical faculty alert. She seemed to be seeking reassurance

and knew when she found it. She reports in a letter to James Taylor of her visit to London in 1851 :-

What remains in the memory is D'Aubigne's, Melvill's and Maurice's preaching.... Melvill was the most eloquent. Maurice the most earnest; had I the choice it is Maurice whose ministry I should frequent.⁴⁶

This is an interesting observation in view of the fact that Maurice was subsequently deprived of his professorship at King's College, London, for openly stating his doubts about the reality of the doctrine of eternal punishment.

Charlotte Brontë's words in a letter to W. S. Williams about her brother's death/ suggest that she too, had long ago discarded this doctrine as a possibility:

I felt that there was peace and forgiveness for him in heaven....If a man can experience total oblivion of his fellows' imperfections how much more can the Eternal Being, who made man, forgive his creature? ⁴⁷

Equally unequivocal are Patrick Brontë's words relating to his choice of curate:

I should not feel comfortable with a coadjutor who would preach the appalling doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation. ⁴⁸

It is possible that Maurice's avowed thinking on social issues, which would later develop into what became known as Christian Socialism, savoured of the enlightened Tory paternalism which was not politically radical. Such words could be used to describe Patrick Brontë's brand of Tory enlightenment.

As Marion J. Phillips points out, Charlotte Brontë reacted to other liberal thinkers, people as different as Dr Thomas Arnold, John Ruskin, Merle D'Aubigne, Alexander Harris, Francis Newman. They also won her approval. Of Dr Arnold she writes to her W. S. Williams in 1850 :-

Oh! I wish Dr Arnold were yet living....were there
 but ten such men amongst the Hierarchs of the Church
 of England she might bid defiance to all the scarlet hats
 and stockings in the Pope's gift. Her sanctuaries would
 be purified, her rites reformed, her withered veins would
 swell again with vital sap.⁴⁹

Arnold's thinking according to Marion Phillips was too innovative and latitudinarian to be ignored. His great theme was the importance of personal conscience, the greater responsibility and participation of the laity in church matters, and a church which should be "a dynamic comprehensive congregation of Christians".⁵⁰

So naturally Charlotte Brontë was equally enthusiastic about D'Aubigne, whose answer to the question "What is the Church?" was "It is the Christian people".⁵¹

These ideas obviously appealed to a mind like Charlotte Brontë's that was venturing beyond the confines of authority. That she was reading with interest, Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and Francis Newman's *The Soul*, we know from a letter Mrs Gaskell refers to in her biography.⁵²

This ambivalence in her thinking on accepted theological dogmas seemed to make her more ready to explore other new ideas, partly scientific and partly esoteric which were sweeping the intellectual circles in which she was beginning to move. She shared with George Eliot a curiosity and interest in the new pseudo-sciences of phrenology, and mesmerism. Pre-Darwinian principles were surfacing in the strange areas of phrenology and physiognomy. They had achieved a semi-scientific status and occur repeatedly in Charlotte Brontë's description of her characters. She even uses the language of phrenology and talks of the "organs" of benevolence, veneration and adhesiveness. Jane Eyre "lives in a world of faces".⁵³ It is the small Jane's "organ of

veneration" that accounts for her admiration for Miss Temple; and Mr Rochester detects that she has a good deal of the organ of adhesiveness. Mr Rochester's "dark face with stern features and heavy brow", His "broad and jetty eyebrows....his decisive nose....full nostrils....grim mouth" make a profound impression. But the pure outline of Mr St John Rivers' "Greek face" is "disconcerting" and "unsympathetic". "If she had not been prepared to take phrenology seriously she would not have visited Dr J. P. Browne" in 1851. But whether this new "system of mental philosophy" added anything to her powers to "analyse the motives of human conduct" is a very moot point.⁵⁴

What is interesting is that she showed curiosity and openness in a changing intellectual climate. Evidence for those changes was to be found in the ripples that emanated from "the more exclusive and reputably most brilliant club" in the Cambridge colleges, where the Apostles debated everything from "fornication and the division of labour to the fraught question of whether mankind had descended from one stock", and at the same time stigmatized and "condemned for hypocrisy and humbug" those pillars of the church - Simeon and his "Sims" whom Charlotte Brontë had been brought up to admire.⁵⁵

So here was Charlotte Brontë born into a Parsonage, and that at a time when religion and religious ideas were matters of profound debate and in some cases of great urgency. Added to that she had a father who insisted on informed and Bible-based sermons; a circle of friends as convinced as he of the need for personal salvation, dependent on Grace and issuing in good works. It was natural then that all topics of religious controversy should be important in her thinking. Taking into account the

resurgence of Roman Catholicism and the consequent antagonism it roused, the influence of the new scientific thinking - and there was an explosive mixture. This did not pass unheeded by the independent and unorthodox minds of the inhabitants of Haworth Parsonage.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE FAMILY BACKGROUND

Patrick Brontë's pilgrimage had not been a conventional one. His birth and upbringing gave little promise of a Cambridge degree and a career in the church. But the help of his good friend Thomas Tighe ensured his being noticed by the Evangelicals and so his path was set. How close Evangelicalism was to Methodism is illustrated by his wide circle of acquaintances. Henry Martyn, the Wesleyan missionary, noticed and recommended him. As a result one Evangelical leader, Wilberforce, advanced £10 per annum towards his college expenses.¹ Simeon assisted him to find his first curacy. The following years brought him into contact with the Shropshire circle of Mary Fletcher, widow of John Fletcher, a friend of John Wesley. In fact he became one of her "precious young men".² Through this contact he moved to Yorkshire and became acquainted with the Fennels, and through them he met his future wife, Maria.

She was a woman of character and intelligence. Had she lived until her children were grown up, undoubtedly their lives would in every way have been very different. She was born in Penzance, in Cornwall, into a strong Methodist family, influential and vigorously involved in the life of their community.

Kate Hall suggests that Charlotte Brontë's heroines - Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe - evince all the longings of a child bereft.³ In psychological language, did she feel "abandoned" by the mother who disappeared from her life at the age of 5? She was certainly very moved when her father gave her in February 1850 the packet of her mother's letters written during their courtship days.⁴ These showed a woman who was not afraid to express openly her tenderest feelings and her strong and firmly held

religious views.

Elizabeth Branwell, her sister, who so valiantly came up to help Patrick Brontë in bringing up his motherless family, showed a more severe aspect of Methodism. Her reserved disposition and her partiality for the Methodist magazines which she took so faithfully, with their more extravagant emphasis on death - bed scenes and last-minute conversions, was not the result, as many Brontë biographers have stated, of any incipient Calvinism. She was too good a follower of John Wesley for that. Here, she and Patrick Brontë were in harmony. But Aunt Branwell missed the warm social life of the Wesleyan community in Penzance, and remained aloof from the more rugged independence of her Yorkshire neighbours. That she gave and received affection within the family is reflected in Anne's and Branwell's reactions to her - the "baby" and the only boy of the family evidently had her heart. Yet when in need Charlotte Brontë could write openly and confidently asking for financial help from her to make possible the period in Brussels.

Charlotte Brontë's connection with Methodism was re-inforced by the fact of living in Haworth, for Haworth held a special place in Methodist history. In the eighteenth century the Reverend William Grimshaw had combined a reputation as a loved and feared minister with being a firm friend of the Wesley brothers. His teapot is still in the Brontë Museum with its "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" - a well-worn Methodist text. But changes in the social and economic structure in the Worth Valley as Colin Dews points out in his *A History of Methodism in Haworth from 1744*

resulted in worsted cloth mills being established in Keighley where canal and railway provided adequate communication. The consequent growth in population fostered the desire to build more chapels. Grimshaw had erected the first Wesleyan chapel in Haworth in 1758. The new chapel opened by the Wesleyans in 1846 held over six hundred and fifty, and was enlarged again in 1853. Primitive Methodism had also established itself in Yorkshire, and "The Ranters" entered Haworth "on the 25 April 1821". In fact, summing up, Colin Dews asserts: "it was dissent and Methodism which was the norm rather than the Established Church".⁵ So it was natural that dissenters should feel aggrieved at having to pay church rates for the upkeep of the parish church. With these grievances, surprisingly, Patrick Brontë was sympathetic.

The Methodist connection and influence was strengthened for the Brontë children by the coming of Tabby - Tabitha Aykroyd - as general housekeeper after Mrs Brontë's death. It was her warmth and care that surrounded them in their leisure hours spent in the kitchen of the parsonage, and where their childhood stories were planned together. Other social connections were few. Haworth people were hard-working and independent - according to Mrs Gaskell - "rather apt to repel a stranger.... Their accost is curt.... their feelings not easily roused".⁶ There was little time or opportunity for social gatherings. Such as there were would have been connected with solemn rites like funerals - common occurrences in this town where the drinking water was not all it should have been and where tuberculosis and cholera were fairly frequent visitors. Such funerals must have taken place within sight and sound of the parsonage, which

overlooks that extensive graveyard. Apart from the villagers, the Brontës had their own close experience of death in the family - mother and two sisters within a few years of coming there. That gate from the garden to the churchyard would make death a significant fact to be reckoned with early in their perception of things.

So it was in this rather isolated community that the children were thrown into close dependence on one another. Branwell and Charlotte drew close together and Emily and Anne have been described as being like twins. All of them had shared memories of their beloved elder sister Maria, whose religious faith, even at such an early age, made an indelible impression on Charlotte. This she reflected in the character of Helen Burns - that unusually devout yet charming child in *Jane Eyre*.

Such visitors as there were to the Parsonage were Patrick Brontë's friends; William Morgan, his fellow curate in the early days in Wellington, before they moved to Yorkshire. Contact, too, was maintained with the Firths of Thornton who had befriended the family. All these shared with Patrick Brontë a strong Evangelicalism.

But undoubtedly the most significant episode in Charlotte Brontë's childhood was her stay at Cowan Bridge School. How far this episode was faithfully recorded in the details of Jane Eyre's schooldays has become a matter of debate. After Charlotte Brontë's death, the rightness and wrongness of regarding it as documentary evidence were debated with vigour. This debate took the form of a series of letters which appeared in the Halifax Guardian during June, July, August of 1857. Sarah Baldwin

of Mytholmroyd Parsonage, Halifax, defended the Reverend Carus Wilson's reputation against Charlotte Brontë's attacks. The Reverend A B Nicholls defended his wife's veracity in this matter. Sarah Baldwin wrote :-

It gives me inexpressible pain to see the attempt by distortion and exaggeration of facts to disparage a valuable institution and cast odium on a venerated minister of our church.... I do not appear in the attractive character of a novelist, yet as a clergyman's wife I trust that my statement may be considered as worthy of credit as those of Charlotte Brontë.⁷

Mr Nicholls replies ironically :-

The writer.... as a compensation for not being a novelist.... announces that she is a clergyman's wife and therefore worthy of credit. Rare logic!.... and Mrs Baldwin was not there at the time, consequently she cannot personally know whether the statements in *Jane Eyre* are true or false.⁸

There is certainly a false note somewhere in Sarah Baldwin's arguments :-

I bear testimony.... of the affectionate feeling with which we regarded the kind Carus Wilson family. I have not read *Jane Eyre*, for I felt it a waste of time to read tales founded on falsehoods.... I now send a little donation as a proof of my regard for him (Carus Wilson).⁹

Here she certainly lays herself open to Mr Nicholls' gibe about a "begging box" and a "little congenial business". Mr Nicholls finally closes the correspondence with the words :-

I have done with the subject. I have discharged a painful duty. Henceforth Charlotte Brontë's assailants may growl and snarl over her grave undisturbed by me.¹⁰

Doubt remains as to how far Brocklehurst was intended as a true representation of Carus Wilson. The truth would seem to be that any deeply emotional experience happening in childhood is bound to have a profound effect and become part of a novelist's imaginative vision.

The choice of Cowan Bridge School was part of a genuine and carefully thought out plan, for these motherless children to receive care and education in a religious milieu. In 1823 Patrick Brontë, on the advice of his friends, the Firths of Thornton, had sent his two eldest daughters to Miss Mangnall's - a well-established school in Wakefield. But he found the fees more than he could manage. What more likely then than the semi-charitable status of Cowan Bridge should seem to answer a need. After all, it was opened specifically for the daughters of poor Evangelical clergy; also, it was to be a preventive measure to curtail the spread of High Church teaching. It received the support of Evangelical leaders of some standing, such as Wilberforce, Charles Simeon and Hannah More. One wonders how they could have studied the Reverend Carus Wilson's publications without having grave doubts; tracts that dwelt on the sinfulness of children, and how holy death was better than an unholy life. The book put into Jane Eyre's hand, *The Children's Guide*, has an account of the death of a little girl which is identical to many in *The Children's Friend* which Carus Wilson actually published.¹¹

The poor management and dirty cook given as the explanation of the unappetising and poor food provided for the girls in the school were as Charlotte Brontë said in a letter to Mrs Gaskell later, but the teething problems of poor supervision in the early stages:

The accommodation, the diet, the discipline, the system of tuition.... are.... greatly improved.¹²

What is harder to explain is the hypocrisy and certain sadistic satisfaction which

pervades Mr Brocklehurst's interviews with the rebellious small Jane.

Mr Brocklehurst's abuse of his obligations would seem to lie in his own deficiencies as a human being. The good, Miss Temple and Helen Burns, reflected the warmth and humanity which was obviously nurtured by their Evangelical faith. That same faith became distorted and diminished by the cold and cruel streak in Mr Brocklehurst and was given greater force by the emotions displayed in his so called religious fervour. This distortion was repeated in the treatment meted out by a bullying teacher to the beloved sister Maria in the person of Helen Burns. For surely here the imagination was using the stored-up anger of a child's memories?

Of Charlotte Brontë's second excursion into school life at Miss Wooler's academy in Roe Head, we have a contemporary account from one of her school mates Mary Taylor, as she (Charlotte) made her first appearance on January 19th 1831 :-

I first saw her coming out of a covered cart in very old-fashioned clothes, and looking very cold and miserable.... She was very shy and nervous.... and so short-sighted that she always appeared to be seeking something.¹³

Her school report states that of general subjects "she knew nothing systematically", but in knowledge of the poets, for example, she was ahead of her teachers. The inference is that intervening years of education at the hands of Patrick Brontë had been a time when intellectual exploration went largely unchecked. Systematic teaching in grammar was neglected; but Patrick Brontë had obviously encouraged in his children the delight of discovering the inside of books.

But money was short in the Parsonage, and with her education completed, Charlotte Brontë felt some inner compulsion to contribute to the family finances. Her sense of duty was strong. The only job that seemed possible was that of governess, and the post of governess forced the educated woman into a difficult position. Her education made her "one of the family", therefore "above" the servants who were "below stairs". In practice neither group - mistress and family, nor the servants - welcomed her into their company.¹⁴ As Charlotte Brontë confided to her friend Ellen Nussey, she felt and seemed depressed.

Such being the case, and remembering Charlotte Brontë's own personality, the chances of a happy future were nil. Equally abortive were Emily's attempts at a job at Law Hill, Southowram; and a very unhappy time she had there. The only one of the three who seems to have made a success of "governessing" was Anne, prettier, gentler, more amenable generally. She endeared herself to her pupils, the Robinson girls, and remained at her post from March 1841 until June 1845. Whether she was happy or not is doubtful. Probably her hymn gives us a clue as to her tenacity :-

Believe not those who say
The upward path is smooth
To labour and to love
To pardon and endure
Be this my constant aim.¹⁵

Of Charlotte Brontë's ventures into the educational world, the most impressive was her period in Brussels. It was such a valiant idea: to improve her qualifications, and those of her sisters, by acquiring proficiency in a foreign language, thereby equipping themselves to open a school of their own. But it was a strange uprooting; exciting, but beset with an intolerable strangeness and loneliness. The unexpected reward of an

intellectually stimulating teacher - M. Heger - opened for her new worlds. Her mental horizons were widened, and she revelled in this new life. But she was in a totally strange environment, and one of which she was made particularly conscious because of her father's antagonism, an antagonism common to his circle of friends, to Roman Catholicism. In Belgium, it was not just a religion, but a way of life. And Charlotte Brontë found it repugnant. Add to this the emotional strains and stresses of her attachment to M. Heger, and the ingredients go some way to explaining *Villette*. Emily just detached herself from the scene, did her work to M. Heger's complete satisfaction, but longed for home. When Aunt Branwell's death made that a possibility, she just stayed there, relieved and at peace. Meanwhile Charlotte Brontë remained in Brussels, alternately very happy and very unhappy during a time of great turbulence. Her antagonism to Roman Catholicism became the focus of all her bitterness.

On her return home in 1842, there followed a period of intense unhappiness, which was to be exacerbated for all of them as the years passed, by family tragedies: Branwell's disintegration, and his and Emily's and Anne's early deaths. But in the literary sense, this was a fruitful period; Charlotte Brontë's finding of Emily's poems, the publishing, the starting on the novel writing; and the first triumph of sudden fame brought by the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

It was this entrance into the literary scene, the visits to London, the meeting with stimulating minds such as Thackeray, that brought unexpected pleasure. All these opportunities were suddenly hers through the kind offices of her publisher George Smith and his reader, W. S. Williams. To the small world of Haworth and the large

world of the imagination which books had provided, was added the contemporary vision of the Crystal Palace, the Art Galleries, the Opera, the Theatre. Her circle of friends widened unbelievably: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Kay-Shuttleworths.

The last significant episode in her life was the most unexpected - a happy marriage. Mr Nicholls had featured in her letters for some years; first as one of the "famous" curates, not particularly congenial, because a Puseyite. Various references to him seem to suggest that there was nothing about him that stirred her interest. And even after the final proposal and acceptance, the prospect of marriage does not seem to bring much delight. The tone is muted. In a letter to Miss Wooller, a month before her marriage, she writes :-

The destiny which Providence in his goodness and wisdom seems to offer me will not.... be generally regarded as brilliant, but I trust I see in it some germs of real happiness. I trust the demands of both feeling and duty will be in some measure reconciled.¹⁶

After the marriage, there was a change of mood, and a total change of life-style. "My time is no longer my own" she writes to her friend Miss Wooller.¹⁷ Her visit to Ireland and to Mr Nicholls's family on her honeymoon brought unexpected pleasure. And on her return to Haworth at last she is a "conformist", the good curate's wife. She sounds surprised at herself and surprised at her own happiness and contentment. In a desultory way, she was still writing - the fragment *Emma*. Would she have gone on writing had she lived?

As to the answer to that question, one can only surmise. But it is hard to believe that the Charlotte who used all the emotional turbulence of her early days as material

for her creative imagination, would not have used any further experiences that were to be hers.

Maybe those early memories, the forbidding figures in Cowan Bridge, the secluded yet free, days in the ordered existence of Parsonage life, the traumatic months in the strange world of Brussels could not easily be expunged from her memory: but at the same time, she was longing for new worlds to conquer, and the literary world was one. However, though the horizons might be wider, her mind more receptive to the diverse currents of thought with which she now came into contact, yet the firm foundations of the religious teaching she had received from home and friends remained basically unshaken.

Chapter Two

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16. LL II.355
17. LL II.368

CHAPTER THREE: CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S LETTERS

How Charlotte Brontë's faith and religious belief were tested by those major episodes in her life she was able to reveal in two ways: through her personal letters, and above all, through her novels. First, we will consider her letters. Letters can be revelations of the inner person, intentionally or unintentionally. They can also disguise that inner person and be geared to the character and responses of the recipient.

Charlotte Brontë seemed to have been at her most open in her letters to her friend Ellen Nussey, a friend from Roe Head days. She certainly told her nothing whatever of her plans for her writing and the progress of her novels. But of her hopes and fears in the daily business of living, these she was able to share, certain of Ellen's understanding.

She knew Ellen shared a simple evangelical faith; she also shared a strict evangelical moral code. But above all she could confess to Ellen her changing moods, her fears, anxieties, depression. She seems to have passed through an emotional crisis while at Roe Head and could confess :-

You cannot imagine how hard, rebellious, intractable all my feelings are..... I almost grow blasphemous, atheistical in my sentiments.¹

During periods of grief and personal loss, she could pour out her heart, sure of Ellen's sympathy :-

I avoid looking forward or backward and try to keep looking upward..... the nights are the test, the sudden wakings from restless sleep.²

She obviously had sought Ellen's advice :-

My spirits fall at intervals very low; then I look where you counsel me to look.³

As Anne lay dying she cried again in a letter to Ellen :-

Oh, if it would please God to strengthen and revive Anne how happy we might be together. His will however must be done, and if she is not to recover, it remains to pray for strength and patience.⁴

On matters of personal grief and death, her struggles to come to terms with them and retain her religious faith are human and understandable; they are part of common experience. Certainty of belief in a future life was an integral part of her evangelical training. But she still resented and was angry at the death of Emily. Emily's own nature made the parting particularly difficult. Emily was an enigma to her as she was to the world.

Her reserved nature occasions me great uneasiness of mind.
It is useless to question her, you get no answers.⁵

Charlotte tried to reassure herself after Emily's death :-

No need now to tremble at the hard frost..... the place where
she is gone is better than she has left.⁶

She clung to this assurance even while feeling rebellious, for life had become almost void. She became more resigned to Anne's increasing weakness :-

I try to leave all in God's hands; but faith and resignation are
hard to practice.⁷

But the death itself was quieter and Anne herself helped with her "Courage, Charlotte, courage!"

My poor sister is taken quietly home at last! She died on
Monday..... she said she was happy and thanked God that
death was come and come so gently.⁸

Anything false or hypocritical in the expression of such emotions was totally abhorrent to Charlotte Brontë. The genuine emotions shared with her friends in these letters are a

far cry from the death-bed scenes of the Reverend Carus Wilson's *Youthful Memoirs* and *Children's Magazines* which were the prototypes of the tract Mr Brocklehurst put into the young Jane Eyre's hand: Such lines as these occur in *The Children's Friend* :-

Tis dangerous to provoke a God
Whose power and vengeance none can tell;
One stroke of this almighty rod
Can send young sinners quick to hell.⁹

Such excessive and false sentiments Charlotte Brontë could not tolerate, and she applied the same stern judgments to her own feelings. While she could confess to W. S. Williams in 1850 that "the canker of constant solitude" is very hard to bear, she went on :-

You must not trouble yourself..... to sympathise with me. It is my cup, and I must drink it, as others drink theirs.¹⁰

Throughout her letters there are indications that her vision extended beyond the bounds of her conventional upbringing. It is interesting to note, even in the early years, her attitudes could be surprisingly balanced on matters concerning which she held passionate views. A letter she wrote to Ellen attests this. She is describing the occasion when the two curates, Mr Weightman and Mr Collins gave their amazing sermons on Dissent to a crowded church in Haworth in April 1840.

We had two sermons on Dissent and its consequences preached last Sunday..... one in the afternoon preached by Mr Weightman and one in the evening by Mr Collins. All the dissenters were invited to come and hear. They shut their chapels and came in a body. The church was crowded. Mr Weightman delivered a noble, eloquent, High Church, apostolical succession discourse in which he banged the dissenters most fearlessly and unflinchingly.... Nothing to the dose that was thrust down their throats in the

evening. A keener, cleverer, bolder and more heart-stirring harangue..... I never heard. He did not rant, he did not cant, he did not whine, he did not sniggle; he just got up and spoke with the boldness of a man who was impressed with the truth of what he was saying, who has no fear of his enemies and no dread of consequences. His sermon lasted one hour, yet I was sorry it was done. I do not agree with him or Mr Weightman..... I consider them bigoted, intolerant and wholly unjustifiable on the ground of common sense.

She concludes :-

My conscience will not let me be either a Puseyite or a Hookist; nay, if I were a dissenter I would kick or horsewhip both gentlemen for their stern, bitter attack on my religion and its teachers.

But she must admit :-

In spite of this, I admired the noble integrity which could dictate so fearless an opposition against so strong an antagonist.¹¹

Charlotte Brontë and the congregation generally seem to reveal a refreshing generosity of spirit in the face of religious antagonisms. As the years passed she came to support the recently formed Evangelical Alliance. She gave as her reason, "it is more in accordance with the spirit of the gospel to preach unity among Christians, than to incalcate mutual intolerance and hatred".¹²

Neither was her reading confined. Mrs Gaskell, in a letter to a friend, reported a conversation she had with Charlotte when they met in the Lake District. They both discussed Francis Newman's *Soul* which had been published the previous year.

Francis Newman, unlike his convert brother, became a Unitarian, so naturally, Mrs Gaskell, herself a Unitarian, would be interested. Then in the same conversation, Charlotte went on to describe "Father John Henry Newman's lectures at the Oratory, in a very quiet and concise way".¹³ To have taken this step of going to hear John Henry

Newman at the Oratory in the anti-Catholic atmosphere then prevailing would have been a very bold step for a Protestant, and such a firm Protestant. Her friend, W. S. Williams had recently responded to her interest in Newman by sending her an article on him from the *Leader*. There undoubtedly remained a certain ambivalence in her attitude to Catholicism. Even when in Brussels, where she showed such strong anti-Catholic feelings, there was still the side of her that under great emotional stress, could contemplate the release that confession to a priest could bring; an action that to a committed Protestant would certainly indicate "leanings" to Rome. Yet while in Brussels the whole subject of Catholicism was overlaid by personal prejudices against characters with whom she came into contact; the pupils' apathy, and the efficiency of Mme Heger were to her manifestations of the authoritarian and subjugating power of Rome. Now back in her own country and moving in a new circle of acquaintances some of her prejudices were being challenged by a contact with able and stimulating thinkers whom she respected. Their opinions might differ from her own, but they were certainly worthy of further thought.

This new breadth of vision could even encompass the agnosticism of Harriet Martineau; after all, were they not both seeking truth? Certainly her later letters reveal a more benign and gentler attitude, generally, to opposing viewpoints. After her marriage she could comment on her husband's less generous attitude to dissenters with, what seems, a light touch :-

He (Arthur) is just gone out this morning in a rather refractory mood about some Dissenters.¹⁴

Her antagonisms remained, but they were not so virulent. While in Brussels, in the earlier years, she had been writing to Ellen in 1841 :-

People talk of the danger which Protestants expose themselves to in going to reside in a Catholic Country. My advice to all Protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as to turn Catholic is..... to attend Mass sedulously..... to note well the mummeries thereof, also the idiotic mercenary aspect of all priests.¹⁵

Now, in 1851, though she could still be scathing, as her account of hearing Cardinal

Wiseman proves :-

a big, portly man..... with a double, treble, quadruple chin..... He came swimming into the room, smiling, simpering..... he looked the picture of a sleek hypocrite..... The audience seemed to look up to him as to a god.¹⁶

Yet, amazingly, she went again the next week to the Spanish Ambassador's chapel where Wiseman "in his arch-episcopal robes and mitre" held a confirmation. The whole scene was "impiously theatrical".¹⁷

Discussion she must have had with Mrs Gaskell on Romanism, for she wrote to her in August 1851 :-

(What) has influenced your feelings about the Catholics? I own I cannot be sorry for this commencing change. Good people - very good people- I doubt not there are among the Romanists, but the system is not one which should have such sympathy as yours.¹⁸

She then went on to discuss a book they had both been reading *The Saint's Tragedy* by Charles Kingsley (1848), the story of Elizabeth of Hungary, whose mind not "perfectly sane", was tragically unhinged by "priest power" - according to Charlotte Brontë. She continued the same theme (talking of Elizabeth of Hungary) in a letter to W. S. Williams on Miss Kavanagh's *Women of Christianity*.

Miss Kavanagh's charity and her impartiality are very beautiful. But..... she forgets..... that Protestantism is a quieter creed than Romanism; as it does not clothe its priesthood in scarlet, so neither does it set up its good women for saints.¹⁹

In the day to day business of living her reactions were natural and those shared by most of us. Her personal response to criticism of her work, for example, when it came was human enough. Like everyone else she enjoyed praise. She was humbly proud of a letter from a working man in Haworth, and, as she pointed out, a Dissenter at that!

The document is a sort of record of his feelings after the perusal of *Jane Eyre*; it is artless and earnest, genuine and generous. I value it more than testimonies from higher sources.²⁰

But her passion for justice made it a matter of vital importance that the criticism should be just. G. H. Lewes, who in a published article had considered her work from the angle of her sex rather than her stature as a writer, provoked a very angry outburst. She writes to him :-

I can be on my guard against my enemies; but God deliver me from my friends.²¹

She was gradually gaining confidence in her own powers. Her readiness for new adventures showed itself in several directions. Her Evangelical turn of mind is seen in her choice of London "sights". When asked by her hosts, George Smith and his mother, where she wanted to go, to their surprise among other places she chose two prisons.

Being allowed my own choice..... this time, I chose two prisons - ancient and modern - Newgate and Pentonville; the Bank, the Exchange, the Foundling Hospital and today, Bethlehem Hospital.²²

An interest in social problems was obviously deeply ingrained - the Wesleyan *Path to Perfection* and the Evangelical Wilberforce inheritance were strong within her.

The evangelical inheritance of Patrick Brontë obviously remained an abiding element in her thinking, colouring every encounter. But equally obvious is the growing readiness to trust her own responses, and a readiness, if necessary, to depart from tradition. This could be important in the writing of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. It would result in her work being loudly acclaimed and, in certain, circles, loudly condemned.

Possibly the value of "letters" has an in-built limitation. On the whole, they reveal only what the writer intends one should know, and she often "tailors" the telling to the recipient. But as an additional insight into Charlotte Brontë's thoughts and feelings, we value them. What she says and what she does not say reveal, whether she wishes it or not, which feelings occur most often and most forcefully, and which matters were closest to her heart. The letters are another "chink" through which we can glimpse the real Charlotte Brontë.

NOTES

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1. LL I.142
2. LL II.20
3. LL II.19
4. LL II.50
5. LL I.459
6. LL II.15
7. LL I.459
8. LL II.51
9. LL II Appendix III p.425
10. LL II.174
11. LL I.177
12. LL I.330
13. ECG p.310
14. LL II.376
15. LL I.239
16. LL II.pp.219-20
17. LL II.221
18. LL II.227
19. LL II.260
20. LL II.123
21. LL II.106
22. LL II.301

CHAPTER FOUR: *JANE EYRE* (1847)

Charlotte Brontë's thoughts, her feelings, her beliefs were certainly revealed in her letters; but it is to her novels we turn for a deeper, more intimate exploration of her inner life. Her first novel to be published was *Jane Eyre*; that, too, was the novel that gave her most scope for intimate self-examination.

The publication of *Jane Eyre* was the culmination of a flurry of literary activity on the part of the Brontë sisters. The story is well-known, of Charlotte's finding of Emily's poems, their publication in 1846 - after the overcoming of Emily's strong reluctance - the writing of novels by all three, Charlotte, Emily and Anne under the ambiguous pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. It is well known, too, how Charlotte's contribution *The Professor* was rejected six times by publishers, before she received some encouragement from the literary adviser to the publishing firm of Smith, Elder and Company. His comments gave her fresh hope: the story was "too short and too colourless to sell on its own". What was wanted was a "work in three volumes which would meet with careful attention". To this Charlotte Brontë replied that she had a narrative in hand "to which I have endeavoured to impart a more vivid interest. In about a month I hope to finish it".¹

That was *Jane Eyre*. She had in fact begun to write it while looking after her father during his cataract operation in August 1846. She records that, while there, she had written for three weeks without stopping. She posted it on August 24th 1847, just one year after she had begun work on it. George Smith responded by instant publication; the book was out on October 16th in a three-volume edition, entitled "*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, ed. by C Bell". By the end of the year a second edition had been printed; and in the spring of 1848, a third.

Described as an "Autobiography", that autobiographical element has always been a matter of intense debate among critics and students; how far it should be taken into account in analysing the characters, and action of a novel, and, if found to be significant, how then to assess the factors involved in the novelist's life story. Elisabeth Jay analyses this autobiographical factor in depth in her discussion of the "felt" quality of life. She asserts in the introduction to *The Religion of the Heart*: "fiction can illuminate history by revealing the 'felt' quality of life", and can "use the exploratory world of the novel" to help writers to come to terms with aspects of their own lives that would seem to baffle or anger them. You are then exploring the possible reactions of differing personalities to certain facts in their history, by presenting them in a "slice of life" which is the novel. You are looking at history from the "inside". What was it like for "A" or "B" to live through such experiences, such situations? As Jay puts it, the novelist does what we do, puts out tentacles to test a situation. One of Jay's prime concerns is the impact of Evangelicalism on the nineteenth-century novel. In speaking of this "felt" quality of life by which fiction can "illuminate history" she shows how it can be done, for it can be used to explore the various shades of opinion and individual prejudices; for example, where evangelical dogma may have caused bafflement, a character in the novel can be shown to be searching in an endeavour to come to terms with that bafflement.²

It is a fair assumption that this project could have a bearing on Charlotte Brontë's work, whether she was using that exploratory world consciously or unconsciously.

Immersed as Charlotte was at the personal level in the routine of a clerical household, she was also close by nature and upbringing to a father who thought deeply on these matters, and whose opinions were specific and forcibly expressed. She had been brought up by an Aunt of equally strong convictions, and in constant company with a sister of a quietly devout nature. Even the servants in the household must have made their contribution to the religious atmosphere. Her life-long friend Ellen Nussey, was a sincere and rather emotionally involved Christian. All these contributing factors would still not have borne much weight had it not been for Charlotte's obvious personal commitment to a system of belief. It was not a conventional commitment; Charlotte's turn of mind was independent, she thought for herself and challenged without compromise any belief or action which she found dubious.

This uncompromising attitude is apparent in the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre*. Abuse of power and insidious acts of cruelty are anathema to Charlotte. So when she describes Jane's childhood experiences, she can enter fully into the angry, combative spirit that would not accept the harshness meted out to her by Mrs Reed and the callous nastiness of John and Augusta Reed. She knows she is not being given the caring love Mr Reed had wished for her, and she reacts angrily to the cruel indifference of Mrs Reed's treatment. The world may call such care of an orphan child "charity", but of how little love is involved she is intensely aware. The searing fear of the night spent in the "Red Room" with its oppressive colour, unhappy associations, and bleak loneliness darkens her reactions to all the family. When she encounters Mr Brocklehurst she is already seething with bitterness against all around her. Her childish anger is then

given a focus on this "black pillar" (JE p.33). His "grim face", the lines "harsh and prim", the great nose, the mouth, the prominent teeth are a child's picture of forbidding coldness and power. Any stray Calvinist phraseology which had crept into Aunt Branwell's *Methodist Magazines*, or any possible sermons Charlotte might have heard probably coloured the dark and gloomy picture Mr Brocklehurst presented to the small Jane.

It is unlikely that Charlotte personally experienced interrogation as harsh as that of Jane :-

"Do you know where the wicked go after death?" asks Mr Brocklehurst.

"They go to hell" was my ready and orthodox answer.

"And what is hell? Can you tell me that?"

"A pit full of fire....."

"What must you do to avoid it?"

I deliberated a moment; my answer when it did come was objectionable.

"I must keep in good health and not die" (JE p.34).

Where the answers to the first two questions are obviously remembered lessons from work learned by rote, the last is the spontaneous response of a naturally honest child to an unrehearsed query. Equally direct is the honest and engaging answer to the question :-

"Do you read your Bible - with pleasure?"

"I like Revelations and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel..... and some parts of Kings..... and Job and Jonah" (JE p.35). -

all the books with good stories and with plenty of happenings. But yet a very unusual choice for a small child, obviously reflecting the strange workings of Charlotte's own

brain. For these books are difficult, apocalyptic; the vivid imagery and long time scales involved, and the actions of figures who do, dare, suffer, sin and repent are all on a vast scale. This possibly explains why Charlotte Brontë found the sublime studies of the artist John Martin so appealing.

Already we are glimpsing in the book Charlotte's predilections: her Evangelical upbringing, her father's theological leanings and her close association with Methodist friends and relations would have made Mr Brocklehurst's Calvinism, anathema. Arminianism was part and parcel of Wesleyan Methodist thought and would certainly have been of Mr Brontë's Evangelical Anglicanism. His article on *Conversion* written in 1815 for his friend's periodical *The Pastoral Visitor* is proof of this. There he asserts :-

there must be mercy in heaven; the groans of the
dying Saviour loudly proclaim there is.³

During Jane Eyre's unhappy days when she first goes to Lowood she makes a friend: a friend whose faith is definitely Arminian. The bitter and angry little Jane cannot understand how Helen can endure the reproofs and punishments which her carelessness, her absence of mind and day-dreaming bring upon her from Miss Scatcherd, who is "naturally neat, punctual and particular" (JE p.63). Jane stoutly maintains "when we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard" (JE p.65). Helen tries to convince her that such is unchristian, and that gradually she will learn differently. She herself has come to "hold another creed" to which she clings "for it extends hope to all"; it makes "eternity a rest - a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss" (JE p.67).

As a convincing character portrayal of a young girl, there is a sense in which this is suspect. But such saintly children were frequently found in Victorian fiction. We have only to call to mind Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Agnes in *David Copperfield*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and many others; and though today we find them unreal in their unrelieved goodness, many of Charlotte's readers would have had no such difficulty. But Helen has a reality of her own. Approaching the lonely child, she sits on the ground with her; "she embraced her knees with her arms and rested her head upon them"; a natural and spontaneous childish position (JE p.79). Her arguments are sensible, warm, affectionate :-

Mr Brocklehurst is not a god, nor is he even a great and admired man; he is little liked here: he never took steps to make himself liked. Had he treated you as an especial favourite you would have found enemies..... all around you; as it is the greater number would offer you sympathy if they dared (JE p.80).

That in the same conversation she, a child, can speak of death as (JE p.81) "an entrance into happiness - to glory" is foreign to our twentieth-century minds, but it was second nature to many who surrounded Charlotte - her evangelical father, her Wesleyan aunt, the *Methodist Magazines* that were part of her reading; possibly, too, the occasional conversation with Tabby in the kitchen, for Tabby was a faithful class-leader at the Wesleyan Chapel.

In Elisabeth Jay's chapter on the family and the home she stresses that it is the family - and in certain situations, as in *Jane Eyre*, the school acting "in loco parentis" - which provided the most immediate sphere for the exercise of the sense of accountability for one's fellow mortals. The Reverend J. C. Ryle wrote a sermon for

parents in 1846; if, he said, you love these little ones think often of their souls. No interest should weigh as much as their eternal interests. But for Charlotte Brontë education at an Evangelical establishment was sufficient to confirm that "systematized Evangelicalism could be administered with a harshness undreamt of". Paul Sangster in his *Pity my Simplicity* reminds us that John Wesley himself quoted from his Mother's system of child-rearing:

Break their will - betimes; begin this work before they
can run alone..... break the will if you would not damn
the child.⁴

However, Susanna was not always so extreme; in a letter of advice to John Wesley her approach would seem to have a different emphasis, with perhaps a more human touch.

Every act of obedience should be commended and
frequently rewarded.....
No child should be punished twice for the same fault;
And (important in a large family) no child should invade
the property of another.⁵

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë presents Miss Temple as an example of healthy common sense. She immediately sets herself the task of probing to the bottom of Jane's resentment at being called a "liar", and comes up with a solution, writing to Mr Lloyd, the doctor who can vouch for the truth of Jane's account of the episode in the Red Room. Miss Temple treats the two girls to the warmth and pleasure of tea with her by the fire. This is goodness and kindness in action - not the false caricature of goodness presented by Mr Brocklehurst. And it is a caricature; treated with a tongue-in-the-cheek lightness of touch that makes the scene live:

Mr Brocklehurst..... majestically, surveyed the whole school.
 Suddenly his eye gave a blink.....
 "Miss Temple. What is that girl with curled hair?
 Red hair, ma'am, curled - curled all over?"
 And extending his cane he pointed to the awful object, his hand
 shaking as he did so.
 "It is Julia Severn", replied Miss Temple very quietly.
 "Why, in defiance of every precept..... of this house does she.....
 wear her hair one mass of curls?"
 "Julia's hair curls naturally" returned Miss Temple still more quietly.
 "Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature. I wish
 these girls to be the children of Grace..... Miss Temple, that girl's
 hair must be cut off entirely; I will send a barber tomorrow....."
 Miss Temple seemed to remonstrate.
 "Madam", he pursued "I have a Master to serve whose kingdom
 is not of this world; my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts
 of the flesh, to teach them to clothe themselves..... with sobriety...."
 Here Mr Brocklehurst was interrupted; three other visitors entered
 the room..... splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs. The two
 younger..... had gray beaver hats..... shaded with ostrich plumes....
 and from under the brim fell a profusion of light tresses elaborately
 curled (JE pp.73-4).

The harsh doctrine of man's fallen nature is presented here in dramatic form, with more than a sardonic touch. It was an argument probably discussed with vigour behind the closed door of Mr Brontë's study: one, at any rate, with which Charlotte would have been familiar from Aunt's *Methodist Magazines*. Calvin recognized a divinity natural to the human spirit; in man's darkness remained some sparks of light. But these are insufficient for man's redemption. Only Grace - God's love, free, and unmerited, can restore the lost relationship. To this end he argued God disciplines us. In this scene, Mr Brocklehurst disciplines Jane.

Elisabeth Jay maintains that novelists tend to portray Evangelicals as Calvinists because the hard logic of Calvinism "provided a clarity of definition and an intellectual position which could easily be seen to be at odds with natural human sympathies".⁶

The forbidding Mr Brocklehurst thrusting his tract, the *Child's Guide*, into Jane's hand and exhorting her to read it with prayer, "especially that part containing an account of the awfully sudden death of a child addicted to falsehood", was an obvious reflection of the Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity. To save the child's soul might mean disciplining its body. This is how it was done at Lowood: the "loud bell" wakening the girls; the bitter cold; "one basin between six girls" for washing; the "dimly-lit" schoolroom; the Bible reading lasting one hour, and finally breakfast - uneatable - because the "porridge is burnt again". The intention of the spartan regime was to subdue the flesh - and to save money. But seen from a small child's viewpoint, it is punishment, only calculated to rouse bitter resentment and anger.

It is difficult to assess how far Mr Brocklehurst is a nightmarish figure inspired by childhood memories of pain and anger at suffering and humiliation inflicted on a beloved sister, or the calculated embodiment of an over-zealous Puritanism which could have figured quite often in Aunt Branwell's *Methodist Magazines*, or is he simply a hypocrite? A strong desire for the saving of souls can easily lead to an exaggerated concern for uprightness and self-discipline. With that fact Charlotte Brontë could have been familiar in her encounter with her father's evangelical friends; but there is an emotional tone in her portrayal of Mr Brocklehurst which suggests a personal reaction to a remembered person.

How far the picture of the Reverend Carus Wilson's school at Cowan Bridge was true to life has been a matter of literary debate since Charlotte Brontë's day. Mrs Gaskell assumed it was and for this part of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* she and

her family paid bitterly in newspaper notoriety. The Reverend Carus Wilson, the prime mover in the venture to establish the Clergy Daughters' School, devised a scheme by which a certain sum was raised by subscription to supplement "the amount required to furnish a solid and sufficient education for which the parents' payment of £14 a year would have been insufficient".⁷ He made himself trustee, treasurer, secretary for the enterprise; to it he gave "constant, unwearied superintendence"; but what he lacked was the ability to choose competent persons to take on the other tasks. The subscriptions "did not flow freely"; economy was necessary; unfortunately the cook was careless, dirty and wasteful; the food served therefore often "repulsive". When complaints were made to Mr Wilson his reply was to the effect that "the children were to be trained up to regard higher things than dainty pampering of the appetite and..... he lectured them on the sin of caring over much for carnal things".⁸

Another hardship graphically told in *Jane Eyre* was the walk in winter to Tunstall Church for the Sunday service. They "set out cold, arrived at church colder; during the morning service we became almost paralysed. It was too far to return to dinner and an allowance of cold meat and bread..... was served round between the services" (JE pp.68-9).

The greatest sufferer in this situation was the eldest child, Maria Brontë, from all accounts a highly intelligent and sensitive child; possibly with Emily's capacity for absorption in things of the mind. "Her incurable untidyness..... was a failing peculiarly hateful to Mr Wilson".⁹ Undoubtedly the Helen Burns of *Jane Eyre* owes much to Charlotte's childhood memories of Maria's experiences at school. The unjust punishment inflicted on Helen made Jane very angry:-

Burns left the class and going into a small inner room..... returned..... with a bundle of twigs tied together at one end. This ominous tool she presented to Miss Scatcherd with a respectful curtsy; then she quietly..... unloosed her pinafore and the teacher instantly and sharply inflicted on her neck a dozen strokes with the bunch of twigs. Not a tear rose to Burns's eye..... I paused in my sewing because my fingers quivered..... with unavailing and impotent anger. "Hardened girl!" exclaimed Miss Scatcherd, "carry the rod away!" Burns obeyed..... I looked at her narrowly. She was putting back her handkerchief into her pocket, and the trace of a tear glistened on her cheek (JE pp.60-1).

The controversy over these scenes reappeared after Charlotte's death. Appendix III to Clement Shorter's *The Brontës; Life and Letters* gives extracts from an article by the Reverend Angus M. Mackay.¹⁰ He reports that some said the Reverend Carus Wilson "deserved the chastisement he got". Others, that Charlotte Brontë had seen the scenes "through the glass of her own imagination". Attention is here drawn to the books Carus Wilson wrote for the young; *Youthful Memoirs* (1828) and *The Children's Friend* (1826-8); these included stories of death and damnation; of the horrors of the Plague. A book for infants even included a picture of a man being hanged. In his *Thoughts suggested to the Superintendent and Ladies of the Clergy Daughters' School*, the Reverend Carus Wilson writes; "With me, it is always an object to nip in the bud any growing symptom of vanity"; and "pupils should be made useful and kept humble".¹¹ All this approximates very closely to the ideas in *Jane Eyre*; and the admonitions of Mr Brocklehurst to Jane are similar to those in *The Children's Friend*.

Later the matter became a subject for letters exchanged in the *Halifax Guardian* between the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls and a former pupil at Cowan Bridge.¹² Excerpts from these letters have already been examined in more detail in Chapter 3. Nicholls firmly asserts, "To the day of her death Charlotte Brontë maintained the

picture drawn in *Jane Eyre* was a true one", and brings a letter from a former pupil to substantiate the account Charlotte gave. Sarah Baldwin takes up the cudgels on behalf of Carus Wilson for whom she seems to have had a great admiration. Nicholls' answer has a touch of humour: "The writer..... announces that she is a clergyman's wife and therefore worthy of credit. Rare logic!" But he goes on: "She was not there at the time, consequently she cannot personally know whether the statements in *Jane Eyre* are true or false". Mrs Baldwin's answers, though full of praise for Carus Wilson, are not convincing as arguments, and on the whole Nicholls emerges as the more convincing.

There were others who defended the Reverend Carus Wilson against the treatment meted out in *Jane Eyre*. Elisabeth Jay analyses the work of one of these - a novelist Emma Jane Worboise who wrote *Thornycroft Hall: An Evangelical answer to Jane Eyre*.¹³ *The Christian Observer* in 1857 had criticized *Jane Eyre*:

Her picture is that of a morbid fancy mixing up fiction with fact and traducing with a random pen an Institution to which she and her family were wholesale debtors.

E. J. Worboise set out, using the proven appeal of the *Jane Eyre* theme to "isolate the Evangelical experience of life, and stress the need for total dependence on the Divine Friend".¹⁴ The author shared much with Charlotte Brontë; her Evangelical background, a time spent in Cowan Bridge as a pupil, experience as a teacher, and a leaning towards literary work. But Worboise wrote of a later period in the school's history, when it had moved to a healthier situation in Casterton, when the teething troubles of organisation had been eradicated. Also she saw Carus Wilson as "a

kindly second father"; she admired him for writing pamphlets like *Thoughts on the times, with reference to the present position of the Church of England*. We are treated to a picture of a man who was "kind, good, laborious, eminently pious". But as Elisabeth Jay makes clear, she was a didactic writer and she would have been failing in her loyalty to Evangelical doctrine if she did not present him as subject to the weaknesses tainting pre-lapsarian man : "he certainly held peculiar views; he attached great importance to trifles, and was self-opinionated".¹⁵ So Elisabeth Jay reaches the conclusion that a combination of her devotion to fact and the paramount desire to provide an Evangelical witness were Mrs Worboise's downfall. They were cogent factors - among others - in her failure to produce a "best-seller".

As a writer with an Evangelical background, one element Charlotte Brontë does not neglect is the death-bed scene. Since conversion, the repentance of the questing soul, was central to the way an Evangelical saw the christian experience; the possibility of such a change of heart was to be pursued until the moment of death itself. "And if the delights of heaven were described, so were the terrors of hell".¹⁶ This was used by many lesser writers to dramatic advantage. The lingering emotional death-bed scene was a central feature of several tracts and writings for young children. The horrors facing the sinner were dwelt on with lurid detail. As Elisabeth Jay tells us, in Mrs Worboise's novel "Julia's bouts of delirium" are used as a moral tableau - with the caption "The terrible danger of putting off to the last the..... awfully great question of one's eternal salvation".¹⁷

Compared with this the death of Helen Burns is restrained and real. "The confidence of Evangelicals had its roots in the inward persuasion that God was on their side".¹⁸ That is the tone here; that the individual had significance and was uniquely important. Missing her friend, the young Jane realises that "Helen Burns was numbering her last days in this world..... I experienced a shock of horror, then a strong thrill of grief, then a desire - a necessity to see her"(JE p.93). She creeps at night to her room: "My eye sought Helen and feared to find death". When she finds her she is reassured; Helen speaks so calmly; she cannot be going to die. Creeping into bed beside her, the child is warmed and comforted. "I am very happy Jane, and when you hear that I am dead you must be sure and not grieve; there is nothing to grieve about. The illness which is removing me is not painful..... I leave no-one to regret me much". Helen answers the child's questions "Where is God? What is God?" "I believe God is good..... God is my father; God is my friend; I love him; I believe he loves me". The scene ends with "Goodnight Jane, Goodnight Helen". They are found next morning; Helen is dead, Jane with her arm still round her neck (JE pp.96-7).

This has none of the false emotion of a long-drawn out agonizing over the soul of the departed, and the lacerated feelings of the by-standers. Rather it has the reassurance of a death-bed scene such as John Wesley's friend Elizabeth Ritchie described, where to the end Wesley struggles with the words: "I'll praise my Maker. I'll praise....." and "The best of all is God is with us".¹⁹ In the same vein were William Grimshaw's last words, when he succumbed to the fever which had devastated Haworth. "I have nothing to do but step out of my bed into Heaven".²⁰

These death-bed scenes were important in fiction; they rarely received the restrained treatment that, for example, Charlotte Brontë gives to Mrs Reed's death later in the novel. The tendency was to extract all the emotional impact possible, as Dickens does in his treatment of Little Nell's approaching death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

She had sought out the young children..... she saw
 playing in the churchyard. One of these..... was her
 little favourite.....
 "They say", said the boy..... "that you will be an angel
 before the birds sing again. But you won't will you?
 Don't leave us Nell..... Do not leave us....."
 The little creature folded his hands and kneeled down
 at her feet.....
 "dear Nell. I know you would not be happy when
 you heard that we were crying for your loss?".....
 it was not long before she looked upon him with a
 smile and promised him that she would stay..... as long
 as Heaven would let her.²¹

The death-bed was to many Evangelicals the last opportunity for the struggling soul to accept the mercy of forgiveness before being called to give an account of his stewardship. Therefore last-minute conversions were urgent.

In his treatment of this difficult subject in his study of *Death and the Future Life* Michael Wheeler draws attention to the "tension" between what we understand by our natural body and our spiritual body, which is the substance of St Paul's words on the Resurrection in I Corinthians 15; a "tension" that is maintained throughout the Service for the Burial of the Dead in the *Book of Common Prayer*. There is nothing in Charlotte Brontë's description of the death of Helen Burns nor with that less tranquil occasion, the death of Mrs Reed which would be at variance with this orthodox view.

Incidentally it is interesting to note Matthew Arnold's comment to Mrs Gaskell when attention is drawn to his error in *Haworth Churchyard*, a poem written after Charlotte's death. Of her sisters, Emily and Anne he wrote :-

Round thee they lie - the grass
Blows from their graves to thy own

Anne was, in fact, buried not at Haworth but at St Mary's churchyard, Scarborough.

And as Mrs Gaskell pointed out, the rest of the family were buried in a vault in the church itself. Arnold's reply was :-

I am almost sorry you told me about the place of
their burial. It really seems to me to put the finishing
touch to the strange, cross-grained character of the
fortunes of that ill-fated family that they should even
be placed after death in the wrong uncongenial spot.²²

It seems likely that Charlotte herself would have found the comment light-weight and irrelevant. Death intruded constantly into the lives of the young Brontës - they had lost their mother so early in their lives. And living as they did with the churchyard just beyond the garden gate, funerals conducted by their father must have punctuated their daily lives at quite frequent intervals. "Half the population (of Haworth) died before they were six years old, and the average age of death was twenty-six".²³ Even harder to bear must have been the loss of two beloved older sisters, to whom they must have clung emotionally after their mother's death. Memories would be poignant. Patrick Branwell remembered Maria singing him to sleep with the Wesleyan hymns beloved of their mother. The practice/ (common then even for children) of viewing the body in the coffin certainly remained with him through his life. Charlotte's response in 1848 on viewing Branwell's body was obviously more mature :-

When I looked on the noble face..... of my dead brother.....
 I asked myself what had made him go wrong..... when he
 had so many gifts. I seemed to receive a revelation of the
 feebleness of humanity - the inadequacy of even genius to
 lead to true greatness if unaided by religion and principle.....
 When the struggle was over..... I felt that there was peace
 and forgiveness for him in heaven..... If man can experience
 total oblivion of his fellows' imperfections how much more
 can the Eternal Being who made man, forgive his creature?²⁴

This she wrote to her friend Mr W. S. Williams; the same month she wrote to Ellen

Nussey :-

He is in God's hands now; and the All-powerful is likewise
 the All-merciful.

This maturity was being bought at a bitter price. She may have written in *Jane Eyre* of death-bed scenes, but her experience of them in the year following its publication was to make life seem almost unendurable. Emily's death, coming so soon after Branwell's, devastated Charlotte. Emily died on December 19th and was buried on December 22nd, Mr Nicholls conducting this service. The next day Charlotte writes to Ellen: "There is no Emily in time or on earth now. We feel she is at peace. No need now to tremble for the hard frost..... God has sustained me in a way that I marvel at, through such agony as I had not conceived".²⁵ When, in the New Year she wrote to Mr Williams, the few words she can say reveal a firm conviction of life after death, but full, too, of a very natural grief and inner anger. "I am still sustained..... I can combine with awe of God's judgments, a sense of gratitude for his mercies. Yet life has become very void, and hope has proved a strange traitor..... she kept whispering Emily would not die, and where is she now? Out of my reach..... torn from me".²⁶ She was full of the very natural grief and the inner anger that so often accompanies that grief.

Bewilderment and shock are the human reactions she shared with so many who grieve. There is no suggestion that she could not at the same time hold on to the faith that so far had sustained her.

And so she faced the death of Anne. She reports to Ellen: "Papa wishes me to go to Scarborough with Anne; so I do what I believe is best, and leave the rest to Providence". And in the next letter: "Oh if it would please God to strengthen and revive Anne, how happy we might be together. His will, however, must be done, and if she is not to recover it remains to pray for strength and patience". The death is quiet, as Anne was throughout her life. To Martha Brown at the Parsonage Charlotte reports: "(Anne) said she was very happy and believed she was passing out of earth and into heaven. It was not her custom to talk much about religion, but she was very good and I am certain she is now in a far better place than any this world contains".²⁷

In *Death and the Future Life*, Michael Wheeler adds an Appendix dealing with the Old Testament as the book of hope. He points out that in Victorian theology there was a revival of interest in Biblical typology whereby events in the Old Testament were read as "types" of New Testament events. Hope is the dominant note of the apocalyptic writings of the Jewish prophets. This in the New Testament becomes the hope of the individual for salvation through Jesus Christ. Knowing Charlotte Brontë's familiarity with those apocalyptic writings and reading the letters written after Anne's death it is fairly safe to assume that she would then endeavour to make her own the perfected hope which St Paul expresses in his letter to the Romans.²⁸

The soundness and solidity of the Evangelicalism of the Brontë family is summed up in one sentence taken from the sermon given by Mr Brontë at the funeral of his

curate, the Reverend William Weightman. "If we would know whether a man has died in the Lord we ought..... to ask, has he lived in the Lord?"²⁹ Elisabeth Jay maintains that this conviction is the basis for Charlotte's refusal to give the conventional repentance scene at Mrs Reed's death-bed in *Jane Eyre*. Jane has been called to her Aunt's bed-side; Bessie has realised that Mrs Reed is dying and in obvious distress over her unkindness to Jane in the early years. Meanwhile Jane herself had grown up physically and spiritually. She had discovered for herself that the desire for revenge can be a corrosive force. Through her friend Helen Burns she had learned that there were other ways of coping with anger and hurt. As she is loved and esteemed, her bitterness leaves her and she can show Mrs Reed the forgiveness she had vowed as a child never to show. But Mrs Reed had not changed.

The well-known face was there; stern, relentless as ever
 - there was that peculiar eye which nothing could meet.....
 How often had it lowered on me menace and hatred.....
 yet I stooped down and kissed her..... I knew by her stony
 eye..... that she was resolved to consider me bad to the last.

All the bitterness of the past comes out, hoarded and brooded over :-

"I have had more trouble with that child than anyone would believe. Such a burden to be left on my hands - and so much annoyance as she caused me..... I had a dislike to her mother always; for she was my husband's only sister and a great favourite with him..... He would send for the baby..... I hated it the first time I set eyes on it - a sickly, whining, pining thing!..... Reed pitied it..... he used to nurse it as if it had been his own..... In his last illness, he had it brought continually to his bedside"(JE pp.289-291).

Obviously jealousy and resentment burned very deep.

Jane visits the dying woman a few days later; Mrs Reed is obviously neglected by

her own unloving family. "I found the sickroom unwatched..... the fire was dying in the grate..... I thought, "Whither will that spirit flit..... when at length released?" The question brings to her mind the contrast with Helen Burns's quiet dying. Mrs Reed stirs, and realising that she is very ill, wishes to put right one wrong she has done, by producing the letter from John Eyre which should have been in Jane's possession years ago. Even now, as Jane stoops to assure her of forgiveness - "the feeble fingers shrank from my touch - the glazing eyes shunned my gaze". When Jane finally gazes at the dead body it is "with gloom and pain..... only a grating anguish for her woes - not my loss - and a sombre, tearless dismay at the fearfulness of death in such a form". As she and her cousins leave the room, none of us "dropped a tear" (JE p.300).

There is nothing judgmental, nothing sentimental here; the sheer coldness of the scene is a contrast to the warmth of Mr Brontë's words: "Has (a man) lived in the Lord?", which is the sort of Evangelicalism of which Elisabeth Jay is talking when she says :-

It would appeal to the novelist, since it invited him to contemplate characters who recognized no compulsion to conform to standards of contemporary society.³⁰

But if Charlotte Brontë deviated from the norm in her description of what her readers might have expected would be the death-bed conversion of Mrs Reed, she most certainly deviated still further when she came to deal with the age-old man-woman relationship. There was no question that she was treating lightly the moral "impasse" that Mr Rochester's previous marriage affords. Charlotte presents "the romance of a highly individual character made ordinary only by her dissimilarity to the

heroines of romance".³¹ As she had (reputedly) said to her sisters when she was setting out to write her novels "I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself who shall be as interesting as any of yours".³² The critics made savage attacks on her frank and open revelation of the feelings of Jane for Mr Rochester. Here, they said, was a woman "who is throughout the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit". There is a coarseness of tone throughout the writings of all these Bells, wrote a reviewer in *The Spectator* July 18th 1848.

Certainly the language and idiom of her writing had moved away from the conventional tone of contemporary fiction. "He rose and came towards me, and I saw his face all kindled and his full falcon eye flashing..... soft scene, daring demonstration, I would not have; and I stood in peril of both; a weapon of defence must be prepared - I whetted my tongue" (JE p.343). With her rather sharp comments she "worked him up to considerable irritation"; then got up, saying "I wish you good-night sir", and..... slipped out by the side door. By this system, "he was kept rather cross and crusty; but on the whole..... excellently entertained". Yet after all, she has to admit "my task was not an easy one; often I would rather have pleased than teased him. My future husband was becoming to me my whole world..... almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion..... I could not in those days see God for his creature; of whom I had made an idol" (JE p.346).

There is no doubt about the passionate nature of the relationship between the two and the critics recognized this; many of them deplored it. There was her godmother, Mrs Atkinson, wife of the Vicar of Hawkshead, who "considered *Jane Eyre* a wicked

book, bold, irreligious, and unwomanly". And Miss Wooler, her former teacher and friend, to her amazement "far from feeling gratification at her brilliant pupil turning novelist, felt obliged to give her an assurance that nothing should be changed between them!" In a letter to her friend Mr Williams, Charlotte Brontë acknowledged: "Ecclesiastical brows lowered thunder at me".³³

In fact the world was taken aback by the frankness of the passion. Valentine Cunningham's explanation is the inheritance of the "Methodist matrix".³⁴ Words such as "I hold myself supremely blest" are echoes of the language used by Methodist converts, language that would have been familiar to Charlotte in her childhood days (JE p.576). But in reality, this critical attitude was shared by strict Evangelicals, liberal Unitarians and even agnostics. Her friend Mrs Gaskell, a Unitarian took pains to excuse the "existence of coarseness" here and there in Charlotte Brontë's works. Her friend, Harriet Martineau, that advanced thinker, complained, "I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it". Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain however that, curiously enough, it is not primarily the "coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre*" which shocked Victorian reviewers..... but its "anti-christian refusal to accept the forms, customs and standards of society, in short, its rebellious feminism".³⁵

In real-life letters, Charlotte found it impossible to express all this fully. Her feeling for M. Heger is only hinted at in her letter to Ellen: "Send me a letter - to comfort a very desolate heart", she cries in November 1843. And to Emily a month later "I am not ill in body. It is only the mind which is a trifle shaken - for want of comfort".³⁶ But she could never admit that *Jane Eyre* "presented any sort of challenge to conventional religion or morality. The truth and sanity of her outlook on the position of women in

love was such that she could not..... understand the shock her outspokenness provoked".³⁷

But in the Jane-Rochester story, Charlotte is dealing with more than ideas and feelings; she is facing a definite situation, a specific moral problem: bigamy. To nineteenth-century society it was an insoluble problem; in any society, an extremely difficult one. And Charlotte does not flinch. Through Jane she faced the problem and sought a solution. In doing so she used to the utmost the dramatic tensions of a wedding ceremony interrupted and a relationship irrevocably broken. And always with the moral implications in full view.

The morning dawns quietly. "We entered the quiet and humble temple; the priest waited..... at the lowly altar. All was still....." The service began with the solemn words of the marriage service: "I require and charge you both"..... to the "if either of you know any impediment". When is the pause ever broken? But it was.

After the harrowing visit to Mr Rochester's mad wife and when once more alone, sheer desolation overwhelms Jane. The only language Charlotte Brontë can find for her is Biblical language, what Elisabeth Jay calls "the highest emotional register she knew", the language of religion. "Be not far from me for trouble is near: there is none to help" wrote the Psalmist (Psalm 22.11). Such powerful words expressing agony of spirit would be the natural language of all Evangelicals - the Bible their word-book - for their deepest feelings. So when the bitter hour came "consciousness of life lorn, my love lost, my hope quenched, my faith death-struck" (JE pp.374-5), she uses scriptural language: the torrent "poured over her"; the "waters came into my soul; I sank in the deep mire; I felt no standing: I came into deep waters: the floods overflowed me".

But she must face action, and at a time when action is almost impossible. She is "submerged" as the imagery of her language makes only too vivid. But "Mr Rochester, I must leave you". The arguments that follow, within her own conscience, as her answer to: "What am I to do?" are a searching of her real motives, her real longings. And these are as firmly based on "Scriptural holiness" as anything John Wesley confided to his Journal.

Leave Thornfield at once - the inner voice averred.
I stopped my ears..... I have wakened out of most
glorious dreams and found them all void and vain.....
but that I must leave him is..... intolerable; I cannot
do it (JE p.379).

But the voice of conscience "turned tyrant..... and with that arm of iron" swore that "he would thrust her down to unsounded depths of agony". Here Biblical language takes over again: the action entails plucking out the right eye; cutting off the right hand (Matthew 7.27-32). An interesting note in the Clarendon edition of *Jane Eyre* comments :-

As Joseph Prescott has pointed out (*Litterature Moderne* [Bologna] December 1959) these verses form a commentary on the eventual history of Mr Rochester. Guilty of adultery in his heart..... he loses one eye and one hand.³⁸

The night of agony passes. Mr Rochester, humbly waiting outside Jane's door for the angry, bitter recriminations he expects, can only ask forgiveness. "Reader I forgave him at the moment and on the spot" (JE pp.381-3). He goes to kiss her. But her code is rigid. He is married: "there is neither room nor claim for me, sir". To Mr Rochester this entails her being "ice and rock to him". Her relationship to him is now expressed in images of hardness and unrelenting rectitude.

But for Jane the conflict within her is the greater because of the suffering she is causing as well as enduring. "I was so tortured by a sense of remorse at thus hurting his feelings". "I do love you" I said, "but I must not show or indulge the feeling and this is the last time I must express it" (JE pp.386-7). The only course she sees open to her now is separation. And there comes the decisive action: all her beliefs are put into action. "I must begin a new existence amongst strange faces and strange scenes..... If I lived with you as you desire I should then be your mistress; to say otherwise is sophistical, is false". The logic of the truth of the situation makes her inexorable in her stand.

Though she understands the problems inherent in Mr Rochester's situation, it is the moral dilemma which remains the crucial factor, the dilemma of goodness versus absolute goodness, and the age-old problem of the consequences of our choices. She could argue that so much good would result from her remaining and that no-one would suffer,

Is it better to drive a fellow creature to despair than
to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured
by the breach?..... For one moment conscience and
reason turn traitors..... think of his misery..... soothe him,
save him, love him: Who in the world cares for you? (JE p.404)

No wonder it was a "terrible moment full of struggle, blackness, burning".

Not a human being could wish to be loved better than
I was loved..... and I must renounce love..... one drear
word comprised my intolerable duty - Depart! (JE pp.402-3)

For she believes firmly and clearly that to choose a second-best good is to compromise that good totally. "We were born to strive and to endure". She refused to compromise, and to the desolating question "Who cares for you?" she answers, "I care for myself", I

will "keep the laws of God".

Laws and principles are not for times when there is no temptation; they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour..... If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?..... Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations are all I have at this hour to standby; there I plant my foot (JE pp.404-5).

Such introspection and interior argument is a familiar feature of evangelical striving towards perfection, and is to be seen in countless tracts and novels of the period.

One other temptation is dealt with as Jane Eyre continues her pilgrimage, her battle with herself and her circumstances. Life with Mr Rochester would have represented for her love without religion. She now meets a man who will offer her a life of religion without love. After desolation of body and spirit, she finds a haven in Moor House with Diana and Mary Rivers and their brother St John. There she meets kindness and affection, practical caring in a good household. The human physical warmth which surrounds her revives her. But it is the brother, St John, who is the most important protagonist in Jane's new struggle. And is there a possible significance in the very name? The image is of a clear-flowing river, life-giving water, compared to the harsh rock-like turbulence of the Rochester episode. The very images used to describe him are different: his flesh is mortal, his eye "a cold bright blue gem"; he was "pure as the deep sunless source", but "passionless, without drawing from my veins a single drop of blood" (JE pp.524-5). How this compares with Mr Rochester, whose movements are "sudden", "violent", his voice "hoarse"; his "look that of a man who is just about to burst an insufferable bond and plunge headlong into wild licence"; his voice and hand

"quivered", his large nostrils "dilated"; his eyes "blazed". Everything about Mr Rochester is violent, vivid: "he seemed to devour me with his flaring glance"; he "ground his teeth"; "forth flashed the fire from his eyes" (JE pp.385-7).

But with one side of St John's life and character Charlotte Brontë is thoroughly familiar. He is a devoted pastor, out visiting his flock in all weathers. Could this possibly be a reflection of a life-style to which Charlotte was used to in Haworth? Of her own father it was remembered "his gaunt frame, supported by his long staff was a well-known sight all over the parish".³⁹ Equally familiar, too, was the daily catechising lesson at the village school. That side of St John's character is comprehensible to her, but it is his religious convictions that Jane herself finds disturbing. "Zealous in his ministerial labours, blameless in his life and habits, he yet did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity..... which should be the reward of every sincere Christian". Puzzling too was the fact that "Nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters..... never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence" (JE p.448).

Some time elapsed before she really has the opportunity of "gauging his mind". This comes in a sermon he preaches at his church in Morton. "It began calm..... an earnestly felt, yet strictly restrained zeal breathed in the distinct accents..... This grew to force - compressed, condensed, controlled. The heart was thrilled, the mind astonished by the power of the preacher" (JE p.449). But "throughout there was a strange bitterness..... stern allusions to Calvinist doctrines - election, predestination, reprobation - were frequent. When he had done, instead of feeling better, calmer..... I experienced an inexpressible sadness..... I was sure St John Rivers..... had not yet

found that peace of God which passeth all understanding; he had no more found it than had I with my concealed and racking regrets for my broken idol and lost elysium". The harshness of his creed is carried into his attitudes to Christian service. Jane had asked him to find her employment, he now offers it, but warns her it is a "service of poverty and obscurity"; but maintains that "the more arid and unreclaimed the soil where the Christian labourer's task of tillage is appointed him..... the higher the honour" (JE p.450). It is in fact a school for the children of the poor. To Jane, it was a task "not ignoble, not unworthy", and she accepted it with all her heart. Then the contradiction in his character emerges; for he is sure she cannot long be content with this post, "any more than I can be content to live here buried in morass..... my faculties, Heaven-bestowed, paralysed, made useless" (JE p.454). So much for contentment with a humble lot!

But in his spiritual wrestling St John Rivers has responded to the call of the mission field. This was part and parcel of Evangelical teaching; the spreading of the "Good News". "Activism was an enduring hall-mark of the Evangelical movement".⁴⁰ As William Carey contended, the Great Commission was still binding on believers. This activism was most apparent among Wesleyans, and probably an accepted idea in the Brontë household. Elisabeth Jay notes that in 1820 Yorkshire subscriptions to the C.M.S. were larger than those of the combined London parishes.⁴¹

St John's firm conviction of his call to be a missionary had repercussions for Jane, for he sees her as a helpmeet in the venture. To that end he tries to discipline her natural enjoyment of ordinary pleasures. When he urges her not to "cling so

tenaciously to ties of the flesh", she light-heartedly replies that she understands him "just as if he were speaking Greek". He persuades her to study Hindustani with him; but she feels he is stifling her with his demands. "By degrees he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind" (JE p.500). She could no longer talk and laugh freely. Teased by Diana to treat her as a sister, he is persuaded to kiss Jane. "There are no such things as marble kisses or ice kisses, or I should say my ecclesiastical cousin's salute belonged to one of these classes; but these may be experiment kisses, and his was an experiment kiss" (JE p.509). The effect: "I felt as if this kiss were a seal affixed to my fetters". But she is going against her own nature. "Stifling half her faculties". What was real for her was her memory of Mr Rochester, not this. So when the final call to mission comes, she is confused, distraught, unhappy. His appeal is cerebral, but powerful - "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife". It may be in the mind, but one is as aware of tension and conflict within St John himself as within Jane. Jane's own inner conflict she can understand only too well; St John's she can understand no more than he can himself. What makes confusion doubly difficult is the religious element, the talk of God not being satisfied with "half an oblation", talk of a "mutilated sacrifice" (JE p.579).

Jane has the honesty to see that she could conceive of going to India as his helpmeet, his fellow worker; to go as his wife would be denying her very self. "Forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low to compel it to burn inwardly..... this would be unendurable" (JE p.520). When she can no longer argue, she has to face him with the truth that he would not see: "I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer; yes,

St John, and I scorn you when you offer it" (JE p.522).

The remaining scenes with St John reveal the harshness lurking beneath what had seemed an austere charm. All this is torture to Jane, rousing a "trembling trouble of quiet". "I felt how, if I were his wife this good man..... could kill me..... without receiving on his own crystal conscience the faintest stain of crime" (JE.p.525). But the tensions created reach a climax as farewells are said. They are more than Jane can stand, and, hesitatingly she tries to do what is asked. Overwhelmed she "fervently longed to do what was right. 'Show me, show me the path' I entreated of Heaven" (JE p.535). And the response is a voice somewhere: "Jane! Jane! Jane!" - a known, loved well-remembered voice. "I am coming" she cries. She escapes to her room and waits for the morning eager for daylight. The Brontës drew on literary traditions in which spiritual experience is conveyed through dreams and visions. The apocalyptic language of the book of Revelation and the language of Bunyan were their childhood reading. So that Jane should hear Rochester's voice calling her would have seemed a spiritual experience quite within the comprehension of any Brontë.

The ending is quiet, as equilibrium is restored. She seeks out Mr Rochester. "Reader - I married him. A quiet wedding we had, he and I, the parson and clerk were alone present" (JE p.574). No repetition of dramatic interventions; the insuperable obstacle to the marriage has gone. So there is no longer a moral dilemma. Such a happy outcome would please readers of the novel as a romance. It is even possible it would, to some extent, satisfy those of an evangelical turn of mind, in so far as here was a partnership that would strengthen what was best in each and would provide a solid base for the rearing of a family.

Reverting to her scriptural language to describe her happiness she feels herself "supremely blessed". She is "bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh" (Genesis: 11:23). An additional blessing - they are friends. "To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking" - "perfect accord" (JE p.576) - the sort of relationship that eluded the founder of Methodism!

But it has been a struggle of extraordinary depth. Reason, duty, the realisation that St John Rivers was calling her to an absorbing, fulfilling task, all play their part in the struggle. To many of her evangelical readers Charlotte Brontë would have seemed in error, and her heroine Jane Eyre would be considered to be making the wrong choice. She should have married St John Rivers; should have forfeited her own personal happiness for the "cause", the "larger good". To them the spreading of the gospel was a compelling obligation. From early years Charlotte Brontë would have been listening to sermons, to conversations between Patrick Brontë and his friends and the emphasis would undoubtedly have been on the strong call of duty, and the passionate appeal of missionary work. But for Jane Eyre Charlotte Brontë does not make it a straightforward choice between duty and non-duty. The whole inner struggle is confused by her emotional response, and the emotions are a confusion of affection, admiration, gratitude. But behind all is the realisation that truth would be denied, the real Jane would be deflected from the right path. To be true to St John Rivers, she would not be true to herself. Such spiritual searchings and struggles were a familiar Evangelical experience. John Wesley's *Journals* and the outpourings of

his followers were full of such powerful emotional language as that of *Jane Eyre*.

Evangelicalism gave her the base, the framework for her arguments. Her own passionate nature and innate search for truth provided the living flesh to put on the bones of her firmly held beliefs. In her letters she can give vent to feelings of utter desolation and bitterness. To *Jane Eyre* she can give a much more vivid language.

Edging darkness seemed to swim round me and
reflection came as black and confused a flow.....
I heard a flood loosened in remote mountains and
felt the torrent come..... One idea only throbbed life-
like within me - a remembrance of God; it begot an
unuttered prayer..... 'Be not far from me; for trouble
is near. There is none to help'. (Psalm 22¹¹) (JE p.374)

The emotions of loss and sense of abandonment receive the same vivid and colourful expression in John Wesley's account in his *Journal* of his mishandling of a personal relationship with a certain Sophia while in Georgia on missionary work - an experience that brought unhappiness to all concerned.

In a storm, I think - What of the journey home?
For what art thou wandering over the face of the
earth?..... What shall I do? Where shall I fly?⁴²

The storm he actually experiences on his journey home is but a symbol of the storm within. The only adequate words he could find to give expression to this utter desolation were the words of John Donne:-

I have a sin of fear that when I've spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore.⁴³

Critics are divided as to how far in tracing Charlotte Brontë's religious ideas in her novels, we are "mixing fiction with fact" (to borrow a phrase from *The Christian Observer*); and how far they do embody Charlotte Brontë's own "religion of the heart".⁴⁴ It is a matter for debate - unproven and now unproveable. It would seem that we are getting nearer to the truth when we say with Elisabeth Jay that we are in the presence of the Coleridgean "Secondary Imagination" which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate".⁴⁵ Charlotte Brontë had obviously "absorbed much of the Evangelical ethos and recognized it as a fruitful source on which her imagination could feed"; and, unlike her opposite number Mrs Emma Jane Worboise, she did not use it "for the propagation of the Gospel". On the other hand, as Jay points out, an ignorance of Evangelical conversion literature does not in any way impair one's appreciation of the intensity of feeling that Charlotte wished to convey.

The story of *Jane Eyre* is certainly a creation; a contrived dramatic situation: but it is convincing. The moral problems faced have reality: the selfish, petty cruelty of Mrs Reed and the spiteful bullying by her children, carry conviction. Yet there is no evidence that here Charlotte was drawing on experience: no evidence that as a child she was subjected to harshness such as that. Here the imagination seems to be assembling the building blocks of childhood experiences from other sources. She gives a very clear exposition of the relative importance of real life and imagination in her response to a criticism by G. H. Lewes. She says: "You advise me not to stray from experience..... Is not the real experience of each individual very limited?.....

Imagination is a strong, restless faculty which claims to be heard".⁴⁶ But of the desolation experienced by Jane when she has to leave Thornfield, undoubtedly she had firsthand experience when she herself left Brussels for the last time. Her letters give corroboration of this, even if only in a phrase or two. Just before her departure, she wrote to Ellen "send me a letter to comfort a very desolate heart".⁴⁷ In the January she returned home she wrote: "As long as I live I shall not forget what the parting with M. Heger cost me".⁴⁸ Several years later she wrote in more restrained language (again to Ellen): "I returned to Brussels after my Aunt's death against my conscience, prompted by what seemed an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total withdrawal..... of happiness".⁴⁹ She did not share her secret with anyone, as far as we can tell, but had she asked advice and help of her immediate circle there is no doubt they would have told her M. Heger was the wrong "match" for her - and this from the religious point of view apart from any other consideration. The years in between had obviously been a time of emotional stress. "I shall soon be thirty; I have done nothing yet..... I feel as if we were all buried here. I long to travel, to work, to live a life of action".⁵⁰ The next month she confesses, "I feel rather fierce and want striking down". Yet when Ellen herself needs comfort during a brother's illness, she can write: "One thing I need not remind you of..... God does all for the best..... a practical test of the strong faith and calm devotion which have marked you a Christian so long".⁵¹

It is possibly the awareness of the relative importance, in a novel, of experience and imagination that made her preserve her anonymity as long as possible. Begun as a device to be used in persuading Emily to allow the joint venture of publishing their

poems privately, she now still values the semblance of privacy it gave. We see this in her repudiation of G. H. Lewes's criticism. She resented the dishonesty that criticised work on the basis of sex not literary worth. "I will tell you", she writes to him, "Why I was so hurt by that review..... not because its praise was stinted..... but because I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman".⁵²

But to many contemporaries, the connection between the Charlotte Brontë who lived so quietly at Haworth and her creation Jane Eyre, remained an enigma. Lord David Cecil's explanation of the enigma is that Charlotte was at once "passionate and puritan".⁵³ Both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* he maintains are "variations on a basic theme" - the search for "love that could at once fulfil the desires of a passionate nature and satisfy the dictates of a stern conscience". Jane Eyre is longing to love and to be loved. In the novel "morality rises to obstruct the fulfilment"; her principles force her to leave Mr Rochester. The match with St John Rivers would satisfy her principles, not her emotional demands. In *Villette* there is again dramatic conflict; this time not between "love and morality, but between love and the hard facts of life".

But by sheer imaginative power, Charlotte Brontë has been able to create a "vivid and unique world" expressed in stories "concerned with permanent and universal issues". But more important to her than the "universal issues" were the immediate issues that moulded the pattern of her life and, at once, stirred and challenged and circumscribed her thinking and feeling; matters that at that time belonged in the realms of the theological and moral debates of the day. For as Lord David Cecil sums up:

"The very limitations of their (the Brontë sisters') existence were a help to them. For the art that lasts best is that which expresses first-hand experience". Therefore the Brontës, confined as they were, wrote about what they had really seen and felt themselves".⁵⁴

This "first-hand experience" related with truth and passion was an integral feature of the evangelical experience. The "saving faith" of John Wesley was always expressed in personal terms. On that historic evening in Aldersgate Street, he said: "An assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine". And in one of the most characteristically Methodist of services, the Covenant Service, held on the first Sunday of every year, are the words :

I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what
Thou wilt..... put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for Thee or laid aside for Thee.

"Nothing", says Rupert Davies, "more clearly expresses the personal nature of Methodist piety".⁵⁵

It was first-hand experience of an evangelical conversion which changed William Wilberforce from a charming, witty leader in London social circles, to an ardent campaigner for the abolition of slavery. It was the personal convictions born of his evangelical upbringing that inspired Lord Shaftesbury's campaigns against child-labour, bad working conditions in mines and poor housing. And it is interesting to note, this conviction of personal commitment was not the prerogative of evangelical Protestants only. It was largely what made John Henry Newman such an enigmatic figure to the contemporary Catholic world. When he entered the Catholic Church in

1845, Rome was not sure what to make of him; the authorities regarded him with some reserve. Phrases used by E. R. Norman describe his "personal sanctity", his "hidden depths of spiritual discernment", the "solitary desolations of his life".⁵⁶ Such phrases perhaps help to explain the attraction he held for Charlotte Brontë. This we can assume from Mrs Gaskell's letter to a friend, describing her meeting with Charlotte Brontë at the Kay-Shuttleworth's house in the Lake District. In course of conversation she recalls, Miss Brontë "told her about Father Newman's lectures at the Brompton Oratory", in a very "quiet, concise and graphic way".⁵⁷

This need to relate first-hand experience took many forms. In Methodist circles, the "testimonies" of the class-meeting were the uneducated man's opportunity to "bare his soul". Charlotte Brontë needed that relief too; she took it in a creative work of fiction. That is probably what startled the critics!

When she came to write *Villette* she maintains this self-revelatory form in an entirely new milieu. A reserved, lonely girl is trying to understand her own passionate feelings, in an alien world. That alien world the critics immediately comprehended, for it was the strange Catholic world which was taking on a new lease of life in England, and was becoming headline news. This strange cultural background provided Lucy Snowe with the situations that would enable her to explore the inner recesses of her own mind. It is a journey inwards.

Chapter Four

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3. Patrick Brontë, 'On Conversion', BST 19.6 (1988) p.273
4. Cited in Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, pp.140-1
5. M. Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism*, (London 1938) p.225
6. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.52
7. ECG p.40
8. ECG pp.43-4
9. W. Gerin, *Charlotte Brontë*, (Oxford 1967) p.14
10. LL II Appendix III p.424
11. LL II Appendix III p.426
12. LL II Appendix VIII p.447
13. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.244
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15. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.256
16. DWB p.5
17. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.260
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20. L and D p.217
21. Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, (Oxford - First published in this edition 1951) p.411
22. Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, (Cambridge 1990) p.63
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24. LL I.453-6
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36. LL I.274
37. W. Gerin, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.430
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42. JJW I.418
43. John Donne, *A Hymne to God the Father* in *Complete Poetry and Prose*,
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49. LL I.339
50. LL I.291
51. LL I.287
52. LL II.106
53. Lord David Cecil, 'Fresh Thoughts on the Brontës', BST.16 (1973) p.170
54. Cecil, 'Fresh Thoughts on the Brontës ', p.175
55. Rupert Davies, *Methodism*, (London 1963) pp.77-8
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CHAPTER FIVE: *SHIRLEY* (1849)

If according to Lord David Cecil "the art that lasts best is that which expresses first hand experience", then Charlotte Brontë's next novel, *Shirley*, promised well. For here, she does make great use of what she had met at first hand - the situations, the people encountered in day-to-day living. She uses the routine of a clerical household, the "curates", the endless political arguments and anecdotal tit-bits that seem to have punctuated Brontë conversation.

One of Charlotte Brontë's critics Fonblanque, said of *Shirley* "of story there is none".¹ More exact perhaps is the comment of Juliet Barker, that there is a lack of focus in the novel.² For one thing there is an undoubted shift in the story-line. We start with Caroline Helstone and her search for a pattern for her rather useless life. Her love for the mill-owner, Robert Moore, solves nothing; he does not return her love, and he himself faces endless problems among his work force. We move later in the novel to the strong and independent character, Shirley, who succeeds only too well in finding outlets for her energies. Both heroines present facets of the theme of the place of women in society, a theme which was absorbing other writers as different as George Eliot and the poet Tennyson. Woven into the stories of these two heroines are other themes, some controversial, all of special interest to Charlotte Brontë. There is the church, and the place of its clergy in society, and there is a picture of the lack of harmony that can exist between the vicar and his curates, and between the Anglican and Dissenting congregations in a small community. Here the weaker links, the curates, are presented with scant sympathy. So too, the opposition, the Dissenters, come in for similar treatment.

But in one area *Shirley* stands apart from *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*; far more importance was given to the social and political issues that were occupying the country; issues that Patrick Brontë was following with great interest. To bring out these issues, *Shirley* is set in a period in the early years of the century when the Napoleonic Wars and the Orders in Council were imposing savage restrictions on English trade, with dire social consequences. By the Berlin decree of 1806 the French ports had been closed to British trade; in 1807 the Milan decrees forbade neutrals to trade in British goods. And when Britain retaliated with the Orders in Council in 1807, placing restrictions on trade with France, hardship was bound to follow, particularly in the woollen industry which flourished in Yorkshire. Charlotte Brontë could have read all about this in the *Leeds Mercury* of 1812. Her Evangelical background and her father's intense interest, would have ensured her concern about such social problems.

So if she does not delve as deeply into what she "felt", in this novel, if there seems to be a lack of cohesion, a lack of order and symmetry in the plot, less emotional involvement in her characters, the diversity of her interests would seem to explain that. But there were other reasons for her caution and her more objective approach. For one thing she experienced the natural self-pride of the unexpectedly successful author. Could her second attempt match her first? The *Weekly Chronicle* declared *Jane Eyre* to be "the most extraordinary production that has issued from the press for years". The *Westminster Review* named it "Decidedly the best novel of the season".³ One word of praise she most valued was that of Thackeray: "It interested me so much I have lost.... a whole day in reading it".⁴ To maintain such popularity was indeed a formidable task.

Then there were those who did not approve of the moral tone of *Jane Eyre*. Their criticism was daunting. The reviews that gave her most pain were those directed against the moral integrity of the novel, for example that of Miss Rigby (later Lady Eastlake) who maintained that, if the writer were a woman, she must be one "who had long forfeited the society of her own sex".⁵ These criticisms, though she repudiated them, yet they stung. So when she again deals with the woman-in-love theme it is on a much more impersonal note.

There was a third reason for her adopting a more objective approach. The circumstances of her life were not auspicious to writing. "I can make no promise as to when another book will be ready", she wrote in April and May 1849 to W. S. Williams.⁶ Yet in June she is writing to him: "Labour is the only radical cure for rooted sorrow". And this, just after the death of Anne, which so swiftly followed the distressing circumstances of Branwell's death, and the sudden tragedy of Emily's. The amazing thing is that *Shirley* could be started at all during these difficult days. No wonder it was an interrupted process. "I try to write now and then", she says during Emily's illness, but the attempt faded to "vanity and vexation of spirit". Yet again: "Work is my best companion". By August 29th 1849 the book was finished. Whatever now became of the work, it had been a boon to her and had helped in the healing process. In a letter to W. S. Williams, on 21st September 1849, she told him:

The faculty of imagination lifted me when I was sinking three months ago..... I am thankful to God who gave me the faculty; and it is a part of my religion to defend this gift and to profit by its possession.⁷

This conviction she put into Rose Yorke's mouth in *Shirley*. Rose is explaining to Caroline Helstone her restless yearning to travel. This echoes Charlotte Brontë's own sense of the desolation of her existence at this time:-

"I am resolved (says Rose) that my life shall be a life. Not a black trance..... buried in marble; nor a long slow death like yours in Briarfield rectory."

She goes on:-

"I feel monotony and death to be almost the same..... Better to try all things and find all empty than to try nothing and leave your life a blank. To do this is to commit the sin of him who buried his talent in a napkin."

Her mother reminds her of the importance of doing one's duty. To this she bursts out:-

"If my Master has given me ten talents my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more..... I will not deposit it in a broken-spouted teapot..... least of all will I hide it in a tureen of cold potatoes..... the Lord who gave each of us our talents will come..... some day and will demand from all an account"(S.pp.451-2).

In this novel Charlotte Brontë is undoubtedly using the confined clerical world with which she was familiar and portraying it with greater definition and from a different perspective. Parish life and the relationships between the denominations have a certain plot value. The reactions of the established church to social and political issues are presented dramatically and given reality by becoming part of the revelation of a particular character. In the book this character is Matthew Helstone. He epitomises the change that had taken place in clerical training and status during the later part of the eighteenth-century. It was becoming clear that problems of non-residence and the inadequacy in the training of the clergy were leading to apathy and falling

standards that could verge on scandal, as was made visual by Hogarth in his caricatures. But this was not the whole picture as is made clear in recent research published by J. Walsh, C. Haydon and S. Taylor in *The Church of England: 1689-1833*.⁸ So that by the early nineteenth-century, the clergy saw themselves as educators, spiritual and moral teachers, whose duty it was to preach to their flock, to oversee the catechizing of members and encourage the growth of Sunday Schools. These would seem to be the standards that Matthew Helstone sought to maintain. It is a world which bears comparisons with that depicted by another novelist, brought up in and influenced by her clerical background - namely Jane Austen. She too, as the daughter of a clergyman, sister of two others, and cousin of four more, was well-versed in clerical lore. But the world she delighted to describe was the social scene to which the clergy had entrance, the society of the "best" families, the comfortably-off of landed families who made up "country-house" society. Here her gifts of laughter and irony had full scope. Charlotte Brontë's clerical world was viewed through different eyes, and the differences are partly attributable to personality, but also to circumstances, upbringing and home influence. The evangelical Anglicanism of Patrick Brontë was a powerful influence on Charlotte's own religious outlook. And he himself had been strongly influenced, in turn, by Methodism at many stages of his career. That he inherited Grimshaw's mantle to some extent was a further contributing factor. Memories of the overflowing services taken by John Wesley and then by Grimshaw himself, must have become a legend in Haworth. Other movements were afoot; in the thirties, within the Church of England, the Oxford Movement was taking shape and the names of Newman, Faber, Ward were much to the fore.

What was felt as the over-emotional subjectivity of the Evangelical, whether in the Church of England or in Nonconformity, was countered by a strong movement towards tradition, order and ritual. This could have been a matter of daily controversy within the Parsonage. Certainly Charlotte Brontë assumes her readers would easily pick up her references to "vestments", the "Italian-ironed double frills" and the short versus the long surplice (denoting high or low proclivities). The surplice, used in the administration of the sacraments, and in preaching, had been objected to by the Calvinist Reformers on the continent, and by the Puritans in England, as a relic of popery. The Genevan gown was the accepted garb for the preacher. The length of the surplice became an issue because the Roman Catholic rule was that the surplice should never reach below the knees. Therefore the short Italian "cotta" edged with lace which came into vogue in the seventeenth-century was particularly suspect - hence Charlotte's reference. Then the Gorham Judgment rocked the clerical world over the question of Baptism. It was a wide-ranging debate which roused considerable controversy, because it hinged on the nature of grace, and the efficacy of the sacraments - matters that were crucial to an understanding of evangelicalism. There was no doubt as to what was important to Patrick Brontë. "Simeon" Churches, functional, with clear vision designed for preaching, had a faithful disciple in him; he was intent on preaching those carefully prepared sermons, in straightforward language, which even the most illiterate could follow.

So inevitably the clerical world Charlotte Brontë draws on for her background to the novel was coloured by these early influences. At the outset she warned her readers, if

they are expecting "romance", "sentiment", "melodrama" they will be disappointed. The dish set before them "shall be one that a Catholic - ay, even an Anglo-Catholic - might eat on Good Friday in Passion Week"; and the following pages reveal a knowledge of theological and biblical niceties that is both forbidding; yet full of gentle comedy. She has detailed knowledge of the Passover Meal, of the newly-formed Pastoral Aid and Additional Curates Societies; she mentions the Propaganda, the central missionary agency of Rome. She is obviously acquainted with the new "frills" - the vestments that were coming in with Ultramontanism, and makes an ironic comment on the surplice debate which was surfacing in the forties - "the long night-gown..... the shirt-like raiment which had never before waved higher than the reading-desk" (S.p.8). These "youthful Levites", the "abundant shower of curates", are misusing the activity their "moping old vicars" would turn into pastoral duties, in a "triangle of visits" eating and drinking and creating a lot of noise and trouble in their respective lodgings. Sipping their wine, they discussed not theology but "minute points of ecclesiastical discipline, frivolities which seemed empty as bubbles to all save themselves" (S.p.12). They are confronted by the Reverend Matthew Helstone, who with biting sarcasm, compares their loud hectoring tones with the "cloven tongues" and "seventeen languages" of the "miracle of Pentecost" (S.p.16).

The language, Biblical references, knowledge of ecclesiastical garb and procedures are all used to heighten the ironical banter of this scene. But the situation itself was based on personal knowledge and experience of possible causes of antagonism. Charlotte knew how dependent her father increasingly became on curates and was grateful for the help they gave him. But she knew only too well how they could be a

source of petty irritation and minor controversy in the day-to-day life of the parish; she would undoubtedly have detected such feelings emanating from the study on the right of the Parsonage front door.

She herself saw her father's curates as "people", apart from their office, amusing, irritating, agreeable in turn. Some she was fond of; she appreciated the gifts of Willie Weightman, though laughingly referring to him as "Celia-Amelia"; and she came to value the sturdy devotion of Arthur Nicholls. Where she made them figures of fun was in any mismatch between their profession and their Christian conduct; wherever she saw hypocrisy, she was ruthless. She may not have found Mr Nicholls's Puseyite views to her taste, but he was a sincere man, a man of integrity and devoted to his parish duties. And, incidentally, it must have been a source of great satisfaction that he could receive *Shirley* with such delight. Her letter to Ellen in January 1850 records that:-

Mr Nicholls has finished reading *Shirley*, he is delighted with it. John Brown's wife heard him giving vent to roars of laughter as he sat alone, clapping his hands and stamping on the floor. He would read all the scenes about the curates aloud to papa; he triumphed in his own character. What Mr Grant would say is another thing.⁹

At the end of *Shirley* she gives a brief account of the subsequent careers of the three curates who have been so ruthlessly ridiculed, and turns to their successor, a Mr Macarthey, usually assumed to resemble Mr Nicholls. He is "decent, decorous and conscientious..... he laboured faithfully in the parish. The schools, both Sunday and day schools, flourished under his sway, like bay-trees" (S.p.724). These words resemble

very closely the testimonials written for Mr Nicholls when he was leaving Haworth after his disagreement with Mr Brontë over his proposal to Charlotte. Sutcliffe Sowden, a local cleric writes: "The National School which numbered 60 now numbers 300, while the service in the church, especially of an evening, has increased six-fold".¹⁰ Charlotte goes on, Mr Macarthey "had his faults..... but they were proper, steady-going clerical faults..... The circumstance of finding himself invited to tea with a Dissenter would unhinge him for a week. The spectacle of a Quaker wearing his hat in the church..... these things would make strange havoc in Mr Macarthey's physical and mental economy. Otherwise he was sane and rational, diligent and charitable" (S. p.725). We can appreciate her gentle mockery of the man she was later to marry.

Perhaps it was with that gentle and ironical humour that she was able to reconcile her otherwise intransigent attitude to Anglo-Catholicism with Mr Nicholls's Puseyite views. Her response and attitudes in life seemed often much broader and more catholic than her stated opinions on "Catholics, Quakers and such mummeries". For instance, she formed a real friendship with Mrs Gaskell, a firm Unitarian, and visited with pleasure the home, in Manchester, of the Reverend William Gaskell, Minister of Crosse St Chapel. She admired the gifts of Harriet Martineau - the avowed unbeliever - and enjoyed her friendship. The split in their friendship was caused not by religious differences but by Harriet Martineau's caustic comments on *Villette*.

But, in company with other novelists, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, she realised the enormous potential for comedy existing in the figures of clerics with extreme views, especially extreme evangelical views. Such were butts for the comic

spirit, just as would be Mr Slope and his arch-enemy Mrs Proudie and numerous others in the comic scene.

Underneath the comedy it is easy to detect what Charlotte Brontë really values and what she does not. Mr Helstone, that little elderly gentleman "standing straight as a ram-rod, looking keen as a kite" before his recalcitrant curates, may not have had much patience with Moses Barracclough "the preaching tailor" nor his fellow Dissenter Supplehough, but he can appreciate only too well that Supplehough, "plodding through mud this wet night, going to preach at Milldean Opposition Shop", and Barracclough "bellowing in the midst of a conventicle like a possessed bull" should attract converts, where they, the curates, "tarrying over your half-pint of muddy port wine and scolding like angry old women" should too often perform "to bare walls" and preach to "the clerk, the organist and the beadle" (S.pp.17-18).

The curates are objects of scorn because their values are not worthy. The tea which they greedily enjoyed was Yorkshire hospitality at its best; "a multitude of plates of bread and butter..... cheesecakes and tarts..... thin slices of pink ham garnished with green parsley" (S.p.127). After the meal was finished Mr Donne remained immovable, lingering over his cup of cold tea. Their conversation is as poverty-stricken as their table manners; interminable gossip about Sunday schools, missionary work, the contents of Jew baskets. Caroline Helstone longed to tell the insufferable Donne that it was "no proof of refinement..... to be eternally censuring his flock". She longed to ask him "what he had entered the church for". From the tone of her letters we can see a similar response from Charlotte Brontë to the short-comings of her father's curates +

those "poor fellows". Charlotte Brontë obviously does not hold the same views as her character Miss Ainley, to whom:

The clergy were sacred beings..... no matter what might be the insignificance of the individual, his station made him holy..... no matter how clearly their vices and enormous absurdities were pointed out to her, she could not see them;..... the white surplice covered a multitude of sins (S.p.302).

The sacredness of "office" savoured of Anglo-Catholic mummery.

For Charlotte Brontë's Methodist and Evangelical heritage would have made the search for true "holiness" a matter of priority. As Luther says, "works are the inevitable expression of faith.... Faith is a living thing..... we are not saved by works, but if there be no works there must be something amiss with faith".¹¹ Such constitutes real goodness and this, where it is found, is shown to be an attractive quality. Mr Hall, the vicar of Nunnely, may have been unprepossessing in appearance, "he was plain-looking, dark-complexioned..... and stooped a little in walking", but he is loved by the Farren children who come round his knees, and happily chatter to him (S.p.156). He promises Farren, who is out of work, that practical help will be forth-coming, and meanwhile gives his wife a few shillings "to keep the pot boiling". His doctrine of "works" may have been "horrible" to the Antinomian weaver, Mike Hartley, a "violent Jacobin and a leveller", but he was loved by his parishioners, and his kindness appreciated by the "old maids" in their need:

To old ladies he was kind as a son,
To men of every occupation and grade he was
acceptable. The truth, simplicity, frankness of
his manners..... won him friends in every grade (S.p.304).

Charlotte had not lived all her life in Haworth without absorbing innumerable stories of the former incumbent William Grimshaw - a man remembered for his many acts of practical kindness; his almost quixotic care for the needy - taking them into his home and giving them bread and lodging. So she had a store of anecdotes to draw on when describing men like Mr Hall. Even Mr Helstone and his fellow Rectors are credited with:-

strong and thorough acquaintance with the poor of their parishes..... Each rector knew where clothing was needed, where food would be most acceptable, where money could be bestowed with a probability of it being judiciously laid out (S.p.306).

This aspect of "good works" she can use when portraying Caroline's struggle for a more satisfying life. When Caroline is facing the loneliness and disappointment of Robert Moore's withdrawal of friendship, and she finds her life empty and meaningless, she follows her maid Eliza's advice and visits the "old maids", two rather unattractive members of her uncle's flock. She realises for the first time in her rather sheltered life that hardship and unhappiness can blight personality, but at the same time can stimulate more valuable qualities, well worth her while to emulate. She learned compassion for Miss Mann's loneliness and is determined to offer her "affection and respect". Miss Ainley's "good works" amazed her. "She would watch by any sick-bed..... she would nurse the poorest" (S.p.204). She did not always receive thanks, but she earned the friendship and confidence of such as Mr Hall. Goodness shines through all she does. Caroline makes up her mind to try to follow her example. Here Charlotte Brontë is drawing on her own personal experience. She had taken over charge of her father's Sunday School. Not only Sunday School teachers but

"Ladies Auxiliaries" were being used as the century went on. Women gave their time and commitment to various charities and benevolences. Through these, women acquired skills and found interest outside the traditional boundaries of domestic life.¹²

The impact of the life of the individual christian upon the society in which he lives is a central theme in *Shirley*. John Wesley's term "social holiness" had made much of this. "Love to God and our neighbour is the essence of sanctification".¹³ At the personal level Mr Hall puts his goodness into action. The curates do not. In society at large, social issues were matters of deep concern to Charlotte, as they had been to her father. Patrick Brontë had had first hand experience of the Luddite riots while he was still at Hartshead and before he came to Haworth. They were caused by the new "frames", labour saving machines that were making workers redundant. With the rise in the price of bread during the Napoleonic wars, unemployment and starvation became a reality. The Government responded to the threat of anarchy by introducing a bill to make frame-breaking a capital crime. While feeling great sympathy for the suffering of the workers, Patrick Brontë could not condone violence.

In March 1812 a wagon of spare frames destined for a mill near Huddersfield was attacked as it crossed the moorland road. The guards were tied up and the machinery smashed to pieces.¹⁴

It was then that Patrick, with the hint of threats to his life, bought himself two pistols.

With one of these in his pocket..... and his stick grasped firmly in his hand he sallied forth on his duties.¹⁵

The mills were broken into at night and the millowners suddenly attacked. One of these, William Cartwright was chosen as the main enemy. For one thing he had "dark

eyes" and "a sallow complexion", had lived abroad and spoke French well, all highly suspicious attributes in the men's eyes. He was remembered as "more of a foreigner than an Englishman". He was a brave man and did not wish to take protection from the military at the expense of fellow millowners. So he prepared his mill for a siege. He had the support of the local vicar, Hammond Roberson, the incumbent of Hartshead, who allowed his school to be used for the billeting of soldiers, should this become necessary. Hammond Roberson was as uncompromising and forthright as his literary counterpart Matthew Helstone. He gave enthusiastic support to Cartwright, even going so far as to turn up at the siege at Rawfolds Mill with a sword in his hand. This dismayed many supporters. For the Luddites attracted both sympathy and hostility. Their appalling living conditions, their unemployment and poverty roused genuine concern. But their violence was felt to be no solution and only caused widespread fear and alarm.¹⁶

In the event, the hundred who formed the army of General Ludd were defeated by the ten men stoutly defending Cartwright's Mill. There would be sporadic outbreaks afterwards, but Cartwright seems to have won the gratitude of the local millowners by his resolute stand against the Luddites.¹⁷ Undoubtedly those scenes must have remained vividly in Patrick's mind, and would have been part of the legacy of stories passed on to his children. Certainly the scenes in *Shirley* resemble very closely the actual occurrences. Parson Roberson would become Matthew Helstone; "he was a conscientious, hard-headed, hard-handed brave..... faithful little man"; but he "missed his vocation; he should have been a soldier" (S.p.114).

All this was probably brought vividly to mind in the Brontë household by news of

the Chartist agitation which was alarming the Government in the years just before *Shirley* was written. From 1838, with the presentation of the People's Charter, agitation had spread. Most Radicals had believed constitutional reform could alleviate much discontent. But they were beginning to feel stronger measures were needed. This was exacerbated by news of the Revolution in France. The high unemployment, the rise in the price of bread and the consequent extreme poverty caused such misery that agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws threatened to give rise to sporadic outbreaks of violence and rioting. The government grew increasingly alarmed; rejected the Charter, and drafted in extra regiments to control any possible uprisings. This agitation was particularly strong in the area around Haworth; for Haworth was at the centre of the wool manufacturing industry that was expanding in Yorkshire. In the spring of 1848 a mass meeting of agitators was held at "Farnhill Moor near Kildwick, where they were addressed by the Haworth Chartist, Abraham Lighton". With these events on her doorstep, Dr Barker finds it surprising that Charlotte Brontë did not show greater sympathy in *Shirley* for the desperation of the starving Luddites in their agitation. For when the Brontës moved to Haworth they must have been only too aware that the cottage industries which had flourished were being threatened by the new machinery.¹⁸ Patrick's strong Tory leanings left him ambivalent on the vexed question of industrial relationships, an ambivalence he shared with Tory Radicals like Robert Oastler and William Cobbett. He must have seen several families who suffered the deprivation which Charlotte portrays in the Farren household in *Shirley*. As a Tory, he could understand what lay at the heart of the millowner's cause, the need for new machines in a competitive world; as a man, the need for the human touch such as

Caroline advises when discussing Robert Moore's actions. Her words possibly echoed views Charlotte had heard put forward in the kitchen at the Parsonage :-

it will set all the neighbourhood against you more than ever..... You do not know how the people of this country bear malice..... they can keep a stone in their pocket seven years, turn it at the end of that time, keep it seven years longer (S.p.137).

She was only too familiar with the strong feelings engendered by the "Orders in Council" forbidding neutral powers to trade with Britain, and thereby cutting off markets for the Yorkshire mills. When the Orders were repealed in 1812 the bells rang out over Yorkshire and Lancashire; work increased, wages rose, and gradually the new machines were accepted. But in the period in which *Shirley* is set the machines and the foreigner who introduces them are both objects of hatred. Robert and Hortense Moore's Belgian ancestry is always kept to the fore; his "dark complexion" a contributing factor to the antagonism felt locally. Charlotte herself was to reveal some of that personal antagonism again in her treatment of Belgian life in *Villette*. It was already there in *The Professor*. Was it a personal idiosyncrasy? Or did it reflect her bitter memories of the last few months in Brussels?

Consideration of the importance of this anti-foreign strand in the plot of *Shirley* strengthens the force of the comment made by Clement Shorter on the novel. Here, he says, Charlotte Brontë has "something to say about everything".¹⁹ And it is this rather discursive element that possibly makes *Shirley* less absorbing than *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Charlotte Brontë treats various and diverse themes in the novel. One is the question of the position of women. Caroline longs to be able to work in Robert's mill. "I could be apprenticed to your trade..... I could keep books and write the letters".

She wished sincerely that "nature had made her a boy instead of a girl" (S.p.81). In desperation she even considers escaping by becoming a governess, a job which Charlotte herself had found to be nothing but drudgery. The attitude of mind against which Caroline is rebelling is encapsulated in her uncle's response to her: "You shall go to a watering place. I don't mind the expense..... You shall go to Cliff Bridge; and there are two guineas to buy a new frock" (S.pp.212-13). Such an attitude would be anathema to Charlotte Brontë herself. Her anger against George Lewes was sparked off by the sense, that in criticising her work, he saw her as a "woman" rather than as an "author". She protested angrily against the critic in *The Economist* who writes that he would praise the book (*Jane Eyre*) if written by a man and pronounce it odious if the work of a woman.²⁰

Charlotte Brontë was quite clear in her own mind about the natural equality of men and women. What she did not need to do in her own family was to argue her position as man's equal intellectually. Nothing in her upbringing caused her to doubt that. Her father had been unusual in his appreciation of his young wife's intellectual powers; in his readiness to discuss religious matters with Aunt Branwell, and in the thought and care he put into his daughters' education. And it was not only Branwell, but the girls who had been subjected to catechising on moral questions.

Attitudes to women and their place in society were receiving more attention. Evangelicals were ambivalent. John Angell James, Congregational Minister of Carr's Lane, Birmingham, (a vigorous non-conformist) could agree unequivocally with St Paul that in Christ there is neither male nor female but all are on a level as to

obligations, duties and privileges. Yet he could still write: "Woman was intended to occupy a position of subordination and dependence..... in the domestic economy she is second". Then again, (and here Charlotte Brontë would have heartily agreed with him), "fortitude" may have led man "to the cannon's mouth", "but in the fortitude manifested by enduring bodily suffering..... the wasting influence of long continued privations, the gloom of solitude..... is she not superior to man". As to the education of women, what we do not want is to see "women educated to be a man's plaything", which was what Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* was protesting about so angrily.²¹

So while the general opinion might be that there was spiritual equality between men and women, that equality did not extend to the social sphere. Here women were subordinate. Possible consequences of this were dealt with in an article in a popular publication, *The Christian Lady's Friend and Family Repository*, 1832. It was pointed out that while:

A woman's salvation "lay in her responsibilities as mother, wife, daughter or sister", so that "through her services to the family she could suppress the dangerous parts of herself associated with her sexuality"; lack of attachment to a family could mean "that women were exposed to being 'surplus', with no meaning to their lives, and with the additional dangers of uncontained sexuality".²²

Throughout her life Charlotte Brontë co-operated in ordering the Parsonage daily programme according to Mr Brontë's duties and wishes. Yet when she married she seems to have been perfectly happy to have someone who said "we must do so and so. We do so and so accordingly".²³ However any suggestion of "subordination" would have been totally unacceptable.

So the eponymous heroine of *Shirley* can be seen as the protagonist for all women

struggling to become accepted as "persons" and not appendages. Even the name her father chose was one suitable for a boy or a girl. She is spirited, independent, fearless: a "future church-warden, magistrate or captain of yeomanry", she laughingly suggests to Mr Helstone (S.p.224).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have made a study of the distinctly female element in the nineteenth-century literary imagination, and the question of female subordination looms large in their work. Their study perhaps explains why the marriage of Shirley and Louis Moore at the end of the story leaves us with a certain dissatisfaction. Caroline Helstone's arguments have already suggested to us "the tragic consequences of the inability of woman to shape the public history that necessarily affects their own lives".²⁴ Now the "tensions" between Charlotte Brontë's personal opinions and the dictates of literary convention "become especially evident". Since "the only happy ending for women in her society is marriage", therefore Shirley must marry. But Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe Charlotte Brontë intended us to bear in mind that "marriage is a suspect institution based on female subordination". Whether this is so or not is hard to tell; the matter is left unresolved. Certainly Louis' love for Shirley involves his gradually assuming the right to guide and check her in her more extreme ideas.

In exploring this question of women's struggles to be able to come to terms with their own nature and the roles devised for them by society and the church, Charlotte Brontë naturally looked around her own family circle. It is usually assumed that Shirley is a portrait of Emily - Emily as she might have been had she "been placed in

health and prosperity".²⁵ This is how Mrs Gaskell reports Charlotte's comment.

Shirley certainly shares many of Emily's characteristics, including, endearingly, her love of animals and total control of the powerful Tartar who so terrified poor Mr Malone (S.p.310).

According to Mrs Gaskell, many other characters were taken from life within her immediate clerical circle, incorporating as they do their ideas and idiosyncracies. It is especially evident in her treatment of the three curates. This occasionally led her into difficulties. People "recognised themselves or were recognised by others".²⁶ Mr Donne is always assumed to be Joseph Grant who held the post of master of Haworth Grammar School, as well as his curacy; Peter Malone can be identified as James W. Smith, one of Patrick's curates; and David Sweeting as James Bradley, a curate of nearby Oakworth. Canon W. M. Heald of Birstall recognised himself as Mr Hall.

Just as she drew on her knowledge of the people whom she had come to know, so too, she used incidents and stories which had perhaps been passed on orally. For example, Caroline, to while away the time hanging so heavily on her hands searches through her uncle's library for something to read.

Greek and Latin were no use to her; in fact all she can find are some venerable *Lady's Magazines* that had once performed a sea-voyage..... and undergone a storm, and whose pages were stained with salt water; some mad *Methodist Magazines* full of miracles and apparitions..... of ominous dreams and frenzied fanaticism (S.p.452).

This brings to light an anecdote handed down in the Brontë family about Maria Brontë's lost box. Before she married, she sent to her home in Penzance for her belongings. She writes to her future husband:

Dear Saucy Pat,
 My box was stranded on the coast of Devonshire.....
 and dashed to pieces with the violence of the sea, and
 all my little property..... in the mighty deep.²⁷

This letter had obviously been treasured by Patrick Brontë. It could quite possibly have been among the letters he handed to Charlotte, an occasion that moved her very much and which she refers to in a letter to Ellen Nussey.²⁸ The highly coloured reading matter contained in those "mad Methodist Magazines" would have made an appeal to Charlotte too. Apparitions had fascinated her from the Angrian days: they would surface again in the Ghostly Nun in *Villette*. "Ominous dreams", too, were but a step away from the mad Mrs Rochester shut away in the dark fastnesses of Thornfield Hall. Roman Catholics may have had their crucifixes and bleeding statues, but these were nothing compared with the terrors of Bunyan's Apollyon in the Valley of the Shadow, or Milton's Satan in the fiery waste places of Hell. And these images had held Charlotte's imagination from early childhood.

The battle of the Sunday Schools is also based on an actual incident which Patrick would have recounted to his young family - an experience he had while a curate in Dewsbury, leading his Sunday School scholars on a Whitsun-tide march.²⁹ Charlotte related it with relish. Led by the determined Mr Helstone and Shirley "with her parasol" to the tune of the unbiblical "Rule Britannia" they marched forward, quite overwhelming the hostile, black-coated Dissenting band, who marched to the "most dolorous of canticles". The rivalry and antagonism between the Evangelical Anglican and Dissenting armies is a very convincing and entertaining episode. Strong feelings are whipped up in such situations. Charlotte Brontë gives full rein to this in her description. The Dissenters are made to appear figures of fun, with their ineffectual

"fat" and "greasy" leader. The battle won, all entered into the gaiety of the feast, with "buns and beer" (S.pp.341-3). The whole scene gives ample opportunity for the satire, laughter and gentle humour of the interplay of character that church gatherings can supply in abundance in any age, in any place. Of this Charlotte was well aware.

What was her actual response to the Dissenting scene? Charlotte describes Briar Chapel as that "large, new, raw Wesleyan place of worship" which gave voice to such singing as "a very Quaker might feel himself moved by the Spirit to dance to" (S.p.161). The description of hymn-singing in Briar Chapel certainly raises a laugh. But as Dr Gordon Wakefield points out, Wesleyan congregational singing was often raucous and too ostentatious - in sorry violation of John Wesley's own rules:-

Sing modestly. Do not bawl..... but strive to unite
your voices together so as to make one clear
melodious sound.³⁰

The congregation of Briar Chapel do not obey this rule. The last stanza was "a strained shout" interspersed with "yells, ejaculations, frantic cries, agonized groans". In fact, "the roof of the chapel did not fly off", which speaks volumes in praise of its solid slating (S.p.163). Incidentally Cunningham describes the hymns in detail, and they show that Charlotte was thoroughly familiar with *The Collection of Hymns for the use of People called Methodists*. The quotations are accurate too; the "implication is that she had the words by heart", words that were "the staple diet of Methodist spirituality both public and private".³¹

It is interesting to notice how the metrical patterns of these hymns by Charles Wesley were used by Patrick Brontë in some of his verses; for example, the hymn affirming his faith, written on the anniversary of Emily's death uses the same

anapaestic rhythms as abound in the Wesley hymns :

Let Christ and his love be our theme,
Let earth with its cares pass away. ³²

But the satire of the hymn singing in Briar Chapel is gentle. Far more savage is the tone she adopts when describing Moses Barraclough's "double-dyed" hypocrisy. As one of the leaders of the rioters who have attacked the mill, Robert Moore confronts him. The "preaching tailor" proves himself a blustering bully. He whines :-

"My heart is of a softish nature. I'm a very feeling man and when I see my brethren oppressed..... I stand up for 'em; for which intent..... I advises you to part with your infernal machinery"(S.p.151).

Moore asks him whether he is "in connection" with the Wesleyans now. To which he replies :-

"Praise God! Bless his name! I'm a joined Methody"(S.p.151).

Which, as Robert Moore points out to him, does not prevent him from also being "a drunkard and a swindler..... dead-drunk by the roadside"..... and making it his business "to stir up dissension" inciting men "to outrage for bad purposes of your own". Moore goes on :-

" You knocked down one of my men with your own hand - you! A preacher of the Gospel!"(S.p.153)

In marked contrast is the next rioter who speaks, a quiet, honest man whose face is "haggard with want", a face that showed what weeks and months of hardship had done to him. In a quiet, reasonable tone he pleads with Robert Moore to go more slowly with the changes he is making with his new machines. "Give us a bit of time", he pleads, for "we're ill off", our families are "poor and pined" (S.p.153). Robert Moore's response is harsh and unyielding. We are not yet to know that later he will approach

the powerful Mr Yorke and ask him to give William Farren employment. For the harsh treatment Charlotte Brontë metes out to Moses Barraclough is not on account of his being a "joined Methody", but because claiming such allegiance he made a mockery of his claim by his bullying tactics and his self-indulgence. In contrast, William Farren and Robert Moore are reasonable if misguided men. A greater contrast is provided by Mr Hall; here is real goodness, real Christian charity in action. There is no false sentimentality in the description of his visit to the Farren household, where he receives a genuine welcome. He discusses their situation, asks the relevant questions - Can they raise any money by selling any possessions? What would William do if he were given a loan? (S.p.157) To this William can give a concrete and definite answer. For Mr Hall realises that such a loan would not belittle the recipient as charity might. He knows only too well the need to give William Farren back his self-respect, as well as giving him food for his children.

So Charlotte Brontë's satire is selective. She can laugh at pretentious fools like Moses Barraclough. They are fair game; but not at gentle spirits such as Mr Hall. Then again when writing to her friend W. S. Williams about the public's reception of her novel, she is moved by one she received :

I enclose for your perusal a scrap of paper which came into my hands without the knowledge of the writer. He is a poor, working man - a thoughtful, feeling being..... I have not spoken to him above thrice in my life, for he is a Dissenter and has rarely come my way. The document is a sort of record of his feelings after the perusal of *Jane Eyre*..... I value it more than testimonies from higher sources. He said "If Miss Brontë knew he had written it, she would scorn him". Indeed Miss Brontë does not scorn him.³³

The notice Charlotte received gave her new confidence. She was even finding again the ability to laugh at herself. To her friend Miss Wooler she wrote in September 1850 :-

Small fragments of gossip amuse me. When Miss Brontë was in London she neglected to attend divine service on the Sabbath; and in the week spent her time in going about to balls, theatres and operas! ³⁴

However, her critics were wrong; she did go to church. She tells Ellen she had been to hear D'Aubigne, the great French-speaking Swiss pastor. She must have attended several other services too, for in an undated letter she commented to James Taylor on the preaching of Melvill - the "most eloquent" and Maurice, "the most in earnest". "Had I the choice", she had added "it is Maurice whose ministry I should frequent".³⁵

As I have already suggested, Maurice probably appealed because he had had the courage of his convictions in rejecting the orthodox teaching on hell, and had begun to question the morality of the concept of eternal punishment. Charlotte Brontë had done this too, as we saw in her letter to Ellen after Branwell's death.

The All-Powerful is likewise the All-Merciful.³⁶

Then, too, Maurice was an advocate of opportunities for education for the working man. Not that Charlotte Brontë was in any political sense a Socialist; but then neither were many of the Christian Socialists themselves.

The reference to Maurice makes an interesting link with her reading at this time. She tells her friend W. S. Williams :-

I have read J. C. Hare's *Guesses at Truth*, a book containing things that in depth and wisdom recall the *Thoughts of Pascal*; only it is as the light of the moon recalls that of the sun.³⁷

It is worth noting that J. C. Hare was one of the early leaders, with F. D. Maurice, of the Broad Church party, the more liberal wing of the Anglican Church. Hare's - *Guesses at Truth* had been published anonymously in 1827 and it pointed to what Englishmen owed to the studies of German theologians, and so pre-dates George Eliot's translation of Strauss. And it is easy to see why Pascal should make an appeal, with his searching mind and readiness to explore unorthodox opinions. An added interest would be provided by the fact that he was opposed to and opposed by the Jesuits.

All this seems to suggest that Charlotte Brontë's views were becoming more liberal, more open to new ideas in matters ecclesiastical. This is re-inforced by a sentence in a letter to Mrs Gaskell in September 1851 where she discussed with discernment the sermons of James Martineau, Harriet Martineau's brother. James Martineau was described as a man "whose liberal divinity, inspired by both a deep devotionism and a critical intellect..... was well able to confront the Victorian intellectual crisis of faith".³⁸

But she was still quite clear about what she could not accept; one thing was Atheism, as we have already seen from her letter to James Taylor in February 1851 (see Chapter One). So naturally she found it strange that according to atheist thinking "we are called on to rejoice over this hopeless blank". It would have been no liberation, "no state of freedom" to her to dispense with her faith in God, but an "unutterable desolation".³⁹ She would not follow blindly, she wanted to explore the Truth; but she could not accept that Harriet Martineau had found it.

But while she was wrestling with the Truth and trying to understand the agnostic point of view, even possibly breathing in some of the new scientific spirit of inquiry that was surfacing, she was also absorbed in her new book *Villette*. And if she could not accept Atheism, neither could she accept Roman Catholicism. Her feelings are much more deeply roused about Catholicism than Atheism. That, perhaps, is why *Villette* holds the reader's attention far more closely than *Shirley*. In *Shirley* she had been exploring several themes which interested her, social issues, the position of women in society, the part played by the clerical establishment and its competing dissenting groups in the life of a small community. The lack of a unifying theme had been the fault singled out by the critics in their assessment of the novel. Now she could structure the characters and situations of her new novel around one absorbing topic. This she does in *Villette*.

Chapter Five - Shirley

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35. LL II.252
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37. LL II.71
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CHAPTER SIX: *VILLETTE* (1853)

Charlotte Brontë's last novel, *Villette*, was acclaimed by most critics of the time as an undoubted success. She returned to the autobiographical tone of *Jane Eyre*. To use Lord David Cecil's words: "out of her improbabilities and absurdities she constructed an original vision of life; from scattered, distorted fragments of experience she created a world".¹ And she is using that fragment of her experience which was the most overwhelming in all her thirty nine years, her year in M. Heger's school in Brussels. When we add to that the fact that the book appeared at a crucial time, when one of the themes with which she is dealing was pre-occupying public attention, namely the resurgence of Catholicism, it was inevitable that the reading public should take note.

In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë had treated the clerical world that was so familiar to her, with a relatively light touch. We are meant to laugh at the curates for their hypocrisy, their minor peccadilloes. We never relate closely to the Reverend Matthew Helstone; he lacks human warmth. But through the eyes of Caroline we are made to share Charlotte Brontë's appreciation of the goodness and kindness of Mr Hall and of the "old maids", Miss Mann and Miss Ainley.

In *Villette*, however, stronger emotions are roused on religious topics than in *Shirley*. How strong those emotions were was made abundantly clear in her *Letters*; for example, the letter she wrote to her father in 1851 describing a service she attended, where she saw Cardinal Wiseman and heard him speak (see Chapter Three). And yet a week later, the *Letters* reveal, she went again, this time reporting her impressions to her friend Ellen:-

On Sunday I went to the Spanish Ambassador's Chapel where Cardinal Wiseman..... held a confirmation. The whole scene was impiously theatrical.²

Why this interest, and why this antagonism? How far was it a purely personal antipathy? How far was the strength of her father's anti-Catholic feeling responsible? Or was she just absorbing the current Protestant sentiment of her time?

The strength of her involvement in the issue becomes abundantly clear in *Villette*. Her anti-Catholicism becomes an integral part of the plot; it affects the development of the story and is a vital component in her presentation of the most interesting of her male figures, M. Paul Emmanuel. She uses as a background a strange environment, an alien religious atmosphere, yet one charged with peculiarly strong personal emotional memories, and that at a time when feelings were particularly bitter on the subject of Catholicism. A woman of her intellectual ability could have explored more thoroughly Catholic thought and tradition, but she did not. In that lack she is not alone; even today where barriers of communication are so much less formidable it has been impossible, on inquiry, to find much shared ground between Catholic and Protestant in the Haworth area. And it is out of ignorance that prejudice usually arises. There is plenty of prejudice on both sides in *Villette*.

A similar antagonism had been a strong element in her first novel *The Professor*, often seen as the precursor of *Villette*. The early novel had had a chequered career. It was written during the period of shared enterprise with Emily and Anne, after their joint anthology of poems had been dispatched to Aylott and Jones for publication. While Ellis Bell (Emily) was busy with *Wuthering Heights*, Acton Bell (Anne) with *Agnes Grey*, Currer Bell (Charlotte) was occupied with *The Professor*. The

manuscripts went the rounds of several publishers. Eventually *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were accepted, but *The Professor* failed to gain acceptance anywhere. It was not actually published until June 6th 1857, after Charlotte Brontë's death.

The chief character, William Crimsworth, earned his living teaching in a Pensionnat de Demoiselles in Brussels. Here he encounters, as Lucy Snowe does in *Villette*, all the power and prejudice engendered by a Catholic culture. The setting of Brussels, and the scenes and characters there, were the best part of the book, very much the fruit of Charlotte Brontë's recent stay in that city. The whole Heger-Brussels episode was still fresh in her mind and her heart. Elizabeth Gaskell, considering the publication of *The Professor* in 1856 even wondered whether the relationship with M. Heger revealed there would cause more trouble for her personally when her biography was published. She had already faced criticism while she researched the *Life*.

But it was in Charlotte Brontë's last book, *Villette* that these settings, religious tensions, personal relationships are used with mature judgment and understanding. And it is in this book, too, that she can give a passionate and unequivocal defence of her Protestantism and an equally passionate criticism of Catholicism.

English Catholicism had been relatively restrained, quiet. It was what Bossy describes as a branch of the non-conforming tradition, suffering many of the restrictions of a minority group.³ But numbers were increasing steadily and, with them, a vitality and a new fighting spirit - the desire for civil and political recognition. With the influx of Irish immigrants, numbers increased even more rapidly. Protestants reacted vigorously and anti-Catholic feeling was rife. At the same time, Ultramon-

tanism so powerful on the Continent, infiltrated the Roman Catholic Church in Britain. The result was that there was a great upsurge of confidence when the hierarchy was restored in September 1850. Led by Cardinal Wiseman, the Catholic Church was now something to be reckoned with in political as well as religious circles. Feelings ran high on both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide.

Influenced by a father who held strong opinions on the matter, and by her own experience in Brussels, it was unlikely that Charlotte Brontë would be unmoved; and she was not. *Villette* is the fruit of these strong feelings. She was not alone.

Intellectual opinion all over the country was on fire either for the Catholic or Protestant cause. So it was at a crucial time that *Villette* was written. Started in 1851 and published at the beginning of 1853 it appeared in those years when the controversy was at its height.

But if she shared her father's strong opinions on Catholicism, she also shared his equally strong Protestant conviction. The Methodist links established in his youth were maintained in old age. We have a picture of him towards the end of his life attending the Wesleyan Chapel for an evening service.⁴ Why, one wonders, is Charlotte Brontë so ironical about Methodism? She is ruthless in her picture of Moses Barraclough in *Shirley*. In her basic assumptions she seems to have followed her father's Evangelical conviction of the absolute authority of the Bible as containing the whole truth necessary for a man's salvation. She seems to have held in tension the concept of a God of love and a God of wrath. As John Wesley himself said: "What inconvenience is there in speaking much of the wrath and little of the love of God..... It generally hardens them

that believe not and discourages them that do".⁵ John Wesley's emphasis on man's free will led him to the Doctrine of Perfection - the idea that a man could strive and progress in the spiritual life (heretical to Calvinists) made a natural appeal to such individualists as Patrick and Charlotte Brontë.⁶ Patrick Brontë had already asserted in his article *On Conversion* that "though he heard the sentence of eternal condemnation thunder in his ears yet there must be mercy in heaven; the groans of the dying Saviour loudly proclaim there is".⁷ Charlotte Brontë echoed this assurance in her letter to W. S. Williams after Branwell's death; where she speaks of the peace and forgiveness there must be for him in heaven.⁸

Charlotte Brontë was to show these convictions in her novels. Jane Eyre learns forgiveness through the harsh experiences of her childhood and adolescence. Lucy Snowe learns through hurt and disappointment a generous acceptance of other people's virtues and vices, such as Graham Bretton's sanguine and rather thoughtless goodwill, Ginevra's selfish approach to life, and above all M Paul Emmanuel's eccentric but passionate kindness and goodness.

From Charlotte's letters to Ellen Nussey we sense that she did not always find trust and uncompromising faith as easy as did her friend. She confesses when Emily is taken ill. "I try to leave all in God's hands..... but faith and resignation are hard to practice".⁹ Her letters abound with references to "rebelliousness" and "spiritual struggle". This was particularly true during the days at Roe Head: "Christian perfection - if it be necessary to salvation, I shall never be saved. My heart is a real hot-bed for sinful thoughts"; and again "You cannot imagine how hard, rebellious

and intractable all my feelings are..... my theory is right, my practice horribly wrong".¹⁰ Such difficulties her character Lucy Snowe was to experience. Lucy rebels against the pain inflicted by Graham Bretton's indifference, his confidences to her about the flighty Ginevra make "waking..... a mental pain", a "pang" reflected in "the rain dashing against the panes", and "the wind uttering a peevish cry". But finally "faith" sustained, or at least "restrained" - the throbbings of her heart..... She "lifted her head" (V. pp.330-1).

But Charlotte Brontë's own reactions are not all at this level of intensity; when irritated by insincerity and pomposity she could laugh at the perpetrators and at herself. She comments on a visit of her father's curates :-

The other day they all three dropped in, or rather rushed in unexpectedly to tea. It was Monday and baking day. I was hot and tired..... they began glorifying themselves and abusing Dissenters in such a manner that my temper lost its balance, and I pronounced a few sentences - which struck them all dumb. Papa was horrified.¹¹

As the years went on, this more relaxed and tolerant spirit grew. She became known in the literary world and her circle of friends widened. She could tolerate, even try to understand, Harriet Martineau's agnosticism. Where she could not understand, she could still admire. She spent happy hours in the company of her Unitarian friends, the Gaskells. She was entertained at Gawthorpe Hall by Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, and while in the Lake District by Dr Thomas Arnold's widow and family. This was not the closed circle of Haworth.

As a good Protestant, her cultivation of the inner life was fed by an intimate knowledge of the Bible; this is reflected in thought and words throughout her novels.

Other books too fed her imagination. All the young Brontës were familiar with *Pilgrim's Progress* which was on their father's library shelves. Charlotte had been left a copy of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* which had belonged to her mother. Maria Brontë had brought this Catholic book of devotion with her from Cornwall. It was in an edition abridged and published by John Wesley and sold for one shilling for use among his friends and followers. Charlotte Brontë's reading was obviously wide and without sectarian boundaries.

This width of reading, to her delight, was greatly helped by the kindness of her publisher, George Smith, and his reader, W. S. Williams, who regularly sent her boxes of books to read at her leisure. These covered a wide spectrum. They included French novels, the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Kingsley's *The Saints' Tragedy*, S. Brown's *The Tragedy of Galileo Galilei* and many others.¹² This reading opened up new worlds for Charlotte Brontë.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to a similar release, though by different channels, for Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. Through all her experiences of the manipulative and powerful Catholic regime that pervades the Pensionnat de Demoiselles she arrives finally at the freedom and independence symbolized by a home and a school in the Faubourg Clotilde. Lucy has learned that "the end of love must not be equated with the end of life".¹³ She embodies Charlotte Brontë's hope that women can obtain a full, integrated sense of themselves and economic independence, and the possibility of male affection.

But even with all the new friends, new books, new scenes suddenly opened to her,

of any actual contact with a Catholic, at a personal level since her return from Brussels, there is no record. Even comment is limited. In fact in all the family annals only one letter of any significant comment on the matter is traceable, and that is one Patrick Brontë wrote to his brother in Rathfryland in November 1843 :-

Ireland is in a precarious situation..... If all the Protestants in Ireland were rightly armed..... they need not - owing to their good cause, their superior intellects and wealth, fear their opponents. Should the Romanists gain their ends they will destroy..... both Churchmen and Dissenters..... But I would admonish you, my brother, and friends, not to be rash.¹⁴

For a man who had spent the first twenty years of his life in the north of Ireland, his utterances on the tensions between Catholics and Protestants do not seem very illuminating.

Far stronger were his reactions to what he saw as the threat of Puseyism. Interestingly enough, many Puseyites themselves had as ambivalent an attitude to Rome as did the Dissenters. The incursion of ritual, vestments, liturgy and authoritarianism was to Patrick Brontë the immediate threat. It was an underlying irritant in his relationship with his son-in-law, though there is no specific evidence that Mr Nicholls imposed his High Church views on the family in the Parsonage or on the parish generally. Charlotte Brontë seems to have accepted her future husband's High Church views quite philosophically. Catherine Winkworth, a friend of Mrs Gaskell, gives an account of a conversation they had just before her marriage. She reports that Miss Brontë said of Mr Nicholls :-

He is a Puseyite and very stiff, I fear it will stand in the way of intercourse with some of my friends. But I shall always be the same in heart towards them. I shall never let him make me a bigot. I don't think difference of opinion ought to interfere with friendship.¹⁵

Just as Tractarians gradually established their position and clarified their theological and ecclesiastical stand, so at the other side of the divide, Dissenting boundaries were hardening. Within Methodism, after John Wesley's death, splinter groups were breaking away, and to meet this threat Jabez Bunting, as Secretary, then President of the Conference set down firm rules as to the constitution and power of the Methodist Conference and the functions and parameters of influence of the Methodist preachers. The days of the happy interchange of attendance at the Parish Church in the morning and the Methodist class meeting in the afternoon were drawing to a close.

When added to this kaleidoscopic scene, the resurgence of Catholic fervour and the restoration of the hierarchy produced the ingredients for an explosion of religious antagonisms. So when Charlotte Brontë was writing *Villette* her strong Evangelical upbringing and the very powerful influence of her father's mind upon her, led her in one direction - an avowed Protestantism. And her introduction to the flamboyant Catholicism that she encountered while in Brussels led her in another. Here she was introduced to a people and a society nurtured in the most rigid form of what Charlotte Brontë would call "Papistry". And yet there was one side of her nature, that of the young girl who had written the Angria tales, which was attracted by the colour, the drama, the pageantry of the Roman church. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in discussing the irritation felt by some readers at the virulent anti-papal prejudice in

Villette provide a different interpretation. They explain it by saying that though Lucy Snowe sees Catholicism as "slavery", it represents a sort of "sanctioned schizophrenia"; that is why it appeals to her.¹⁶ This, they say, could describe its attraction for Charlotte Brontë also. They go on to show how when Lucy seeks refuge within the confessional she turns to it as offering community and communication which are as welcome to her as "bread to one in extremity of want" (V.p.225).

Charlotte Brontë's conflicting emotional response is reflected in the comments of critics on her work. Lord David Cecil maintains that "any description of her achievement..... resolves itself into a description of her personality..... which is a compound of incongruous elements..... a rigid Puritanism, fiery passion". The contradictoriness that Lord David Cecil sees is reflected in conflicting comments by other critics. Anne Mozley says: "We are not proud of her as a member of our reformed faith". *The Athenaeum* on the other hand maintains, "Her talk is of duty; her predilections lie with passion..... our authoress is superior to the nonsense and narrowness that call themselves, religious controversy". Matthew Arnold however is more forthright: "Why is *Villette* disagreeable? Because the writer's mind is nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage".¹⁷

Certainly in this, her last novel Charlotte Brontë was creating a rich mixture of her personal beliefs and the answers she had tentatively found to moral and philosophical questions that the griefs and bereavements of recent years had made so hard to answer. All that "rich mixture" is taken over by the creative imagination and totally recast as a work of fiction.

Once more, as in *Jane Eyre*, we have a lonely, plain, young woman - Lucy Snowe;

at one time, Lucy Frost, for as Charlotte Brontë explained, she has about her an "external coldness".¹⁸ Her first post is with a "crippled old woman" in "two, hot, close rooms" which became her world. This incident is often criticised as being irrelevant to the story as a whole. But it certainly sets the scene for Lucy's struggles. "Her service was my duty, her pain my suffering - her relief my hope - her anger my punishment - her regard my reward..... All within me became narrowed to my lot" (V.p.150). She sees this interlude as the work of a "Special Providence" as John Wesley would have termed it: "Another decree was written. It seemed I must be stimulated into action. I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy" (V.p.50). In a night of storm and wind Miss Marchmont dies. Lucy is once more alone. A chance encounter (again the working of "Special Providence" to her Protestant mind) with an old schoolfellow gives her the idea of looking abroad - to London or France - for a post, perhaps, as governess. As Charlotte Brontë herself had done, she stays in an inn in the shadow of St Paul's and finds consolation in that. There are phrases in several of Charlotte Brontë's letters which suggest that she herself saw life's chance encounters and happenings as evidence of a guiding hand. When an important decision has to be made, she writes :-

We are over-ruled by one above us - in his hands
our very will is as clay in the hands of the potter.¹⁹

Further evidence of a Providential guiding hand is her meeting on board ship with Ginevra Fanshawe and her consequent arrival after painful adventures in the Pensionnat de Demoiselles of Madame Beck. This is the turning point in her life story. For it is here that she meets the visiting Professor of Literature - Paul Emmanuel, who becomes the key person in her life and the most interesting character in the story. And

he is a Catholic. Charlotte Brontë's understanding of, and fascination with, his strange character arose from his likeness to M. Heger. That friendship: though still powerful in her life had, with the passing of the years, become a bearable pain.

A strange little man he was, "dark..... pungent and austere"..... harsh..... "with his close-shorn, black head, his broad sallow brow..... his wide quivering nostril, his thorough glance and hurried bearing" (V.p.179). Equally strange his behaviour can seem. Coming upon Lucy studying a painting of Cleopatra in a picture gallery, he takes it upon himself to reprimand her for studying what no "demoiselle ought to glance at". He is indeed a despotic little man. Yet already Lucy is coming to appreciate an underlying kindness of heart which shows compassion towards a handicapped and unattractive pupil of the school for whom others find it difficult to care. So she can accept the criticism - as severe as that of the most devoted Puritan - of the colour of the dress she wears to the concert to which she is taken by the Brettons.

The mounting emotional tension between Paul Emmanuel and Lucy is evident in her rather acerbic comments on his interest in her movements and social activities. His "surveillance" smacks to her of Jesuitical intensity; she resents but is piqued by his recommendation to "look at the Catholic 'religieuses' and study their lives" as a pattern for hers (V.p.433). She is obviously intrigued by his notice: "I slightly turned from him, nestling still closer under the wing of silence" (V.p.424). The frisson between them is established: "Never was a better little man.... than M. Paul; never a more waspish little despot" (V.p.434).

Another element which enters into Charlotte Brontë's presentation of the characteristics of Lucy's new environment is that of their "foreignness". This was something that was personally significant to Charlotte herself as we saw in her letters. To Ellen she writes: "The difference in country and religion makes a broad line of demarcation between us and all the rest". And again: "There is a constant sense of solitude in the midst of numbers. The Protestant, the foreigner, is a solitary being".²⁰ Clement Shorter's introduction to the letters of this period sums up his impressions :-

It was Charlotte and Emily's first experience of foreign travel and it came too late in life for them to enter into it with that breadth of mind and tolerance..... lacking which the Englishman abroad is always an offence. Charlotte and Emily hated the country and the people.²¹

In some ways, from her letter to Ellen, it would seem Charlotte did not try to bridge the gulf. "We avoid them (the Belgian girls) which is not difficult to do as we have the brand of Protestantism and Anglicanism upon us".²² Though her sense of isolation in a foreign country is inextricably mixed with her anti-Catholic prejudice it is obviously something of profound importance to her. In *Jane Eyre* Adèle's upbringing and frivolous ways are attributed to her French origins. The Moores in *Shirley* - particularly Hortense - owe many of their weaknesses to their foreign blood. But above all in *The Professor* this derogatory attitude is apparent. William Crimsworth makes his acquaintance with the girls of Mdlle Reuter's Seminary. His comment :-

How was it..... that scarcely one of those girls, having attained the age of fourteen, could look a man in the face with modesty and propriety? An air of bold impudent flirtation, or a loose silly leer was sure to answer the most ordinary glance..... I suspect the

root of this precocious impurity.... so general in Popish countries, is to be found in the discipline..... of the Church of Rome..... They had all been carefully brought up, yet was the mass of them mentally depraved.²³

The English pupils were only distinguishable by their look of "sullen dejection", the result of "constant brow-beating from their popish fellow-pupils".²⁴

There is no firm evidence that Charlotte Brontë held the view that "Protestantism had inherited a special relationship with God", but the idea that she was "protected by her Protestantism" seemed to be assumed. Hence Roman Catholicism was to her and other evangelicals "the very antithesis of British values". The sense that Great Britain was specially favoured by God "seemed to sanction an aggressively patronising attitude to other nations".²⁵ This was certainly so in Charlotte Brontë's attitude to the Belgian girls.

In *Villette* these ideas are developed more forcibly in the context of the plot of the novel. Madame Beck's intrusive behaviour examining Lucy and her belongings while she is asleep is not only a personal idiosyncrasy it is part of her continental Catholicism. Her name was "Modeste Maria Beck..... it ought to have been Ignacia" (V.pp.98-9). There is an element of antagonism in Charlotte Brontë's attitude; girls in Lucy's class who are insubordinate are described as "the swinish multitude" - strong words indeed, which Edmund Burke had used when reflecting on the mob's activities during the Revolution in France. "Severe or continuous mental application they could not or would not bear" (V.p.115). They are easily subdued because they are "trained to be crushed". But when Lucy becomes more intimate with them she ventures to suggest that telling a lie is worse than "occasional lapse in church

attendance"; for this she is put under increased "surveillance". As a Protestant, she was in danger of "hell-fire"! It is possible to argue that here Lucy is being as extreme in her reactions as her intractable pupils. But on the differences between Catholic and Protestant moral standards probably Charlotte Brontë was herself extreme. Too much emotion was tied up with her memories.

The whole tenor of life abroad is dictated by this "subtle essence of Romanism" and it is as totally strange to Lucy as it was to Charlotte Brontë, who loved her "dear land of mists". Here great pains were taken to "hide chains with flowers". Each mind was being "reared in slavery", but to hide this the church strove to bring up her children "robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy..... ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning..... 'Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me', she says" (V.p.177). The language here again is excessive. Charlotte Brontë uses strong imagery, images such as "chains", "slavery" and "the shackling of the mind", to express her sense of repugnance to any form of threat or coercion. The good things in the school, the physical care of the girls, the pleasant surroundings, the frequent holidays, well-planned excursions resulting in "robust..... fat, ruddy" bodies, she cannot quibble with, but the lack of freedom for the mind to explore, to question, was anathema to her. And this Charlotte Brontë lays at the door of Romanism.

Such a sense of estrangement as Lucy felt in her new surroundings was likely to give rise to emotional crises. And these recur almost immediately on her arrival in Labassecour. She commences her adventures with a strange sense of elation. Her life

so far has been so bleak; death had not those terrors for her it had "for the softly reared". Her first sight of Europe was of a coast "one line of gold..... a sky..... from north to south a God-bent bow, an arch of hope" (V.p.76). But the actual arrival in Villette is a troubled one :

darkness, and the small soaking rain..... water
dripping from the trees; the park as black as
midnight (V.p.85).

But worst of all, a lost trunk and no money. However, Providence once more steps in and leads Lucy to Madame Beck's door. Lucy persuades Madame Beck to employ her in any capacity. The relief at finding refuge in this very strange land prompts profound gratitude. "My devotions that night were all thanksgiving" (V.p.95).

Lucy soon becomes aware of the strange new world into which she has entered: and the strangeness is not foreign soil so much as a foreign religion. In the evening after "étude du soir", there follows the "lecture pieuse" here denounced by Lucy as being "a wholesome mortification of the intellect, a useful humiliation of the Reason" (V.p.162). The book from which the story is read is never changed - it contains the legends of saints. "Good God!..... what legends they were..... The ears burned..... as I listened..... to tales of moral martyrdom inflicted by Rome".

But what she sees as the extravagances of Rome reach a climax in the great fête - the celebration of Madame's birthday. There is that extraordinary mixture of devotion and luxury which epitomises Catholicism for Lucy (as it did for Charlotte Brontë). The coiffeur solemnized the mysteries of his art in the presence of "benitier, candle and crucifix" (V.p.181). "Arrayings and bedizonings" are the order of the day. Lucy retires

to an empty schoolroom; but her peace is shattered by M. Paul's demanding she should deputize in the play, for a girl who is ill. To ensure she knows her part, she is shut in an attic, said to be the place where the Ghostly Nun was to be found; her only company rats, black beetles and cockroaches. This bizarre little episode concludes with M. Paul repenting of his harshness and offering her very welcome coffee and cakes. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain the episode by suggesting that in accepting the part in the play Lucy is showing her desire to exist actively as a person:

By refusing to dress completely like a man on stage and by choosing only certain items to signify her male character, Lucy makes the role her own. But at the same time she is liberated by the male garments that she does select.²⁶

Such strange moments Lucy can cope with - between laughter and tears. When it comes to the intolerable loneliness of the long vacation, she is lost :-

My heart almost died within me..... How long were the September days! How silent, how lifeless! How vast and void seemed the desolate premises..... Looking forward at the commencement of those eight weeks, I hardly knew how I was to live to the end (V.p.218).

Life seemed "a hopeless desert". She is left alone, with the only companion a "cretin" for whom she feels obligated to care. Then an aunt comes to take the "cretin" away; even that duty had given some pattern to life.

Now I often walked all day through the burning noon and the arid afternoon, and the dusk evening and came back with moonrise (V.p.221.)

Physical illness sets in, feverish days and sleepless nights. What follows is a turning point for her.

The total depression of spirit and sense of abandonment by all human contact drives her out one evening into the street. Passing a church, she hears the bell summoning worshippers to "salut".

Any solemn rite, any spectacle of sincere worship,
any opening for appeal to God was as welcome to
me then as bread to one in extremity of want. I knelt
down with others on the stone pavement (V.p.225).

Some worshippers remain for confession. Mechanically she follows them, in search of some comfort. She startles the priest with her words: "Father, I am a Protestant". He listens to her cry for help, and honestly acknowledges himself puzzled. The very act of telling him has been a safety valve for her. He assures her he will think over her case.

As a Catholic, he is sure she is being guided to return to the true Church.

Protestantism is "too dry, cold and prosaic" for her. His compassion is real and he suggests that she should visit him the next day at his house, where it is warmer than the Church. But her Protestant reaction is vigorous :-

As soon should I have thought of walking into a
Babylonish furnace (V.p.228).

The Babylonish furnace is a forceful image for it has a double significance. Babylon was immediately connected with the "whore of Babylon", the pleasure-loving city, Rome; therefore, by association, with the superstition, pomp, and pageantry of Roman Catholicism. This, in ultra-Protestant minds signified decadence. But it also has associations with a supreme test of faith for Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshak and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, for remaining faithful to the God of Israel. And Lucy would walk voluntarily

into such a furnace rather than capitulate to Rome.²⁷ She suspects Père Silas's motive :-

He would have tried to kindle, blow and stir up
in me the zeal of good works.

To her, his spiritual guidance would be Romish; she would be exhorted to earn her salvation by good works. To a convinced Protestant that was the wrong route to salvation. As Luther made clear it was by "faith alone", bearing out St Paul's teaching:

For by grace you have been saved through faith;
and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -
not because of works, lest any man should boast.²⁸

But she is becoming over-sensitive in her reaction to Père Silas. In reality, he had sensed her desolation and had followed her after she left the church. He, it was, who saw her lose consciousness, and who cared for her until Dr Bretton happened upon them and took her to his home. When she learns this from Dr Bretton she assures him, that though she would resist all Père Silas's efforts to convert her, she gives him "best and truest thanks".

It is interesting to read in Charlotte Brontë's letters her account of her own visit to the confessional while in Brussels, and while suffering severe depression. She writes to Emily :-

I found myself opposite to Sainte Gudule and the bell began to toll for evening 'salut'. I went in..... and stayed till vespers were over..... An odd whim came into my head..... I took a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession to see what it was like..... I approached at last and knelt down in a niche..... a little wooden door opened and I saw the priest leaning his ear towards me..... I commenced with saying I was a foreigner and had been brought up a Protestant. The priest

asked if I was a Protestant then. I said 'yes'. He replied that in that case I could not "jouir de bonheur de la confesse" At last he said he would allow me because it might be the first step towards returning to the true church..... He told me his address, and said that every morning..... he would reason with me and try to convince me of the error and enormity of being a Protestant!!! I promised faithfully to go. Of course the adventure stops there. I think you had better not tell papa of this. He will not understand it was only a freak, and will perhaps think I am going to turn Catholic.²⁹

There are touches here suggesting that she dare not allow herself to regard this incident as other than a "whim", "serving to yield a moment's interest". In the sober light of after years, Lucy's dire need for companionship and friendly counsel are probably far nearer the mark of Charlotte's actual experience. The exclamation marks suggest she is laughing at herself. Lucy never does this; she fully appreciates the genuine care and concern shown her, and the release that confession had given her. Surely the original action was not only "a freak"; it was a cry for help on Charlotte's part.

In comparing the two accounts of the incident - one from the letter and one from the novel, it would seem that Charlotte Brontë had been able to achieve a more balanced attitude as time passed. Lucy's reaction, though highly emotional, shows more understanding than the rather hysterical under-statements and mis-statements of the letter. Time had done some healing; but also, as we have seen, Charlotte Brontë was becoming more open-minded in her attitude to Catholicism generally. Perhaps she was coming to realise that there could be good Catholics; that kindness was not just a form of proselytizing. She could allow for the fact that confession and other Catholic customs, while not necessarily making an appeal to all, had a validity of their own.

As the relationship grows between Lucy and Paul Emmanuel, she becomes happier, more relaxed. He is alternately acerbic, and gentle; Lucy alternately open and friendly, and withdrawn. Paul Emmanuel can be petty; irritated and disappointed when no present appears from Lucy on his fête day; childishly delighted when she presents him with a hand-made watch-guard; kind and caring when he comes upon her sleeping and covers her with a shawl. The choleric little man is quite unperturbed when she inadvertently breaks his only pair of glasses, "lunettes". When he organises breakfast in the country, it is obvious that he is a man "whom it made happy to see others happy".

Lucy has come to see a new M. Paul. Their emotional responses to each other are changing. Where initially their religious differences made the relationship uneasy, now they add a piquancy to it. Lucy can appreciate his integrity, his simplicity. At the picnic breakfast he made the youngest of the party say a little prayer before beginning. He crossed himself :-

He did it so simply, with such child-like faith. I could not help smiling pleurably..... his eye met my smile, saying..... I see we worship the same God, in the same spirit, though by different rites (V.p.553).

She no longer fears to open her heart.

He says to her, "If I were to go beyond seas to live - three - five years, should you welcome me on my return?" She replies: "Monsieur, how could I live in the interval?"

Père Silas re-enters the story and Madame Walravens and Justine-Marie explain the strange journey M. Paul must take, and why he is not immediately free to marry Lucy.

She realises that though "these Romanists are strange beings", yet this Père Silas is a good man. And Paul Emmanuel is "of the best", "wondrous for fond faith, for pious devotion, for sacrifice of self, for charity unbounded"; in other words her "christian hero" (V.p.573). Is she here losing a clear conception of the tensions that can exist between "the man" and "the creed"; a divergence that can take on something of St Paul's flesh-spirit dichotomy?

Their religious differences are brought out into the open, and they both realise that what separates them is of less significance than what brings them together. He has been cautioned by his friends not to see her. After two days of unnatural silence "it was better than music to hear M. Paul haranguing again just in his old fashion" (V. pp.604-5). He has left a tract on her desk - his last attempt to win her over to Rome. But her answers and arguments are as strong as his. She can defend her "terrible, proud, earnest Protestantism". They talked "seriously and closely". He "pleaded, he argued..... I could not argue..... but I could talk in my own way". "I would not trouble your faith", she says, "you believe in God and Christ and the Bible, and so do I". He was made to feel that Protestants were not necessarily "irreverent Pagans"; they too honoured "the Light, the Life, the Word". "Strange" thinks Lucy, "I had no feverish wish to turn him from the faith of his fathers. I thought Romanism wrong, a great mixed image of gold and clay: but it seemed to me that this Romanist held the purer elements of his creed with an innocency of heart which God must love" (V.p.607).

The attempt to convert the heretic Lucy only strengthens her antipathy to the trappings of Catholicism, an antipathy that Charlotte Brontë could express in powerful

language such as, the Church forges "rivets of servitude"; the priests become "lovers of power, mitred aspirants". Lucy, taken to see the glory of Papal ritual and ceremonial is unimpressed :-

Neither full procession, nor high mass, nor swarming
tapers, nor swinging censers, nor ecclesiastical millinery,
nor celestial jewellery, touched my imagination a whit (V.p.610).

The "obese and aged archbishop, habited in cambric and lace" looked like "a gray daw in bird-of-paradise plumage". This description is an echo of the letter Charlotte Brontë wrote to her father when she visited London in 1851 and saw Cardinal Wiseman in full panoply at the meeting of the Society of St Vincent de Paul.³⁰ Charlotte Brontë's personal reactions and experiences are further echoed in Père Silas's comments on Lucy's - to him - strange habit of going indiscriminately to the three Protestant chapels - Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian. Such liberal attitudes argued to him "profound indifference - what tolerates all can be attached to none" (V.pp.606-7). Whereas Lucy, like Charlotte - wondered at the minute and unimportant character of the differences between these three sects - at the unity and identity of their vital doctrines:

I saw nothing to hinder them from one day being
fused into one grand Holy Alliance (V.p.607).

It is interesting that Charlotte Brontë is writing at a time when the Evangelical Alliance, formed in 1846, was trying to establish itself as a force in Protestantism. It was made up of individual Christians, not denominations, and included Anglican Evangelicals as well as non-conformists. Its nine-point doctrinal statement therefore required it to encompass a wide spectrum of theological traditions.³¹ Charlotte Brontë,

writing to her friend Ellen about a letter she has been reading, which was written by the Swiss Protestant Pastor, D'Aubigné, comments on the work of the Evangelical Alliance :-

It is more in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel to preach unity among Christians, than to inculcate intolerance and hatred.³²

But within the confines of the story in *Villette*, a peace is declared between Lucy and Paul over their religious differences. She made it clear she had a mind to keep to her reformed creed, for "we keep fewer forms between us and God? When I think of sin and sorrow" she says, "chanting priests or mumming officials" were of no help - the only cry with any meaning was "God be merciful to me, a sinner!". Paul Emmanuel accepts this, "God is good and loves all the sincere. Believe then what you can", he replies, "as Time is not for God nor Space, so neither is Measure nor Comparison". He goes on, "We abase ourselves in our littleness, and we do right, yet it may be that the constancy of one heart..... imports as much to Him as the just motion of satellites about their planets" (V.pp.611-2).

The rest of the novel is an Epilogue. The joy of being the proud tenant of Numero 7, Faubourg Clotilde, the assurance that Paul Emmanuel's words "Lucy take my love; one day share my life" afford; these emotions dwarf the religious fanaticism by which Paul's friends had sought to separate them. All seemed simple; a pleasant, useful life to be lived with the added blessing of a loving relationship.

As a novel *Villette* deserves the high status it holds among Brontë critics. The story is engaging, the characters are individuals who stamp themselves on the memory. The

emotions engendered between the quiet but tenacious little Protestant Lucy and the dynamic and mercurial Paul Emmanuel are strong and gripping; certainly Charlotte Brontë, the novelist is at her best.

It is through this enjoyable medium that Charlotte Brontë, a woman with a strong religious faith, is able to reveal all her convictions and with them the prejudices, sympathies and intractability that go to underpin most strongly held religious views. For her age and time, her reactions are typical, shared by many an evangelical Christian. John Wesley would undoubtedly have approved of many of her ideas; so would most of her father's evangelical colleagues. A later age looks for greater ecumenism in religious statements of faith, but maybe, such liberalism is associated with a loss of firmness and clarity of conviction.

In *Villette* then we have from Charlotte Brontë a final and more complete word about what really concerned her - men and women; and the "real" self which to her could only be explored in the religious context in which her life was lived.

If she found that religious context full of ambiguities and conflicting passions, she was not alone. Popular hymns, for example, reflect the prevailing mood in picturesque language:-

The yoke of iron bondage break
The yoke of Satan and of Rome.³³

But as John Wolffe points out :-

Anti-Catholicism was not solely the property of the mob, but also the world-view of those who, in other respects held advanced political and religious opinions.³⁴

This state of affairs caused J. H. Newman to write in 1851 :-

Why is it in this intelligent nation and in this rational nineteenth century, we Catholics are so despised..... that our own countrymen..... are prompt to believe any story, however extravagant..... as if we were brutishly deluded or preternaturally hypocritical?³⁵

Charlotte Brontë was neither "brutishly deluded" nor "preternaturally hypocritical".

Yet her feelings on the matter were strong. The influx of Irish immigrants and the upsurge of Ultramontane influences were creating a new intellectual and cultural climate. Many other thinking people felt challenged. Charlotte Brontë was not alone. It is interesting to speculate how she would have confronted the question as the years went by. In her later letters her responses seemed less extreme in all areas. Years and marriage could have softened the edges of her antagonisms, had she been given more time. But time was not one of the gifts that she was given.

Chapter Six - Villette

1. Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*. Quoted in M. Allott (ed) *Jane Eyre and Villette*, Macmillan Casebook (London 1973) p.173
2. LL II.221
3. JB p.7
4. L and D p.347
5. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.82
6. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 1741 - Published by the Metropolitan Church Association (Wisconsin, USA)
7. P. Brontë, 'On Conversion', BST 19.6 (1988) p.273
8. LL I.454
9. LL I.459
10. LL I.141-2
11. LL I.301
12. LL II.228, 167
13. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.438
14. L and D p.334
15. Rebecca Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.461
16. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp.414-5
17. Cited in M. Allott (ed) *Jane Eyre and Villette* pp. 84, 93, 105, 174
18. LL II.286
19. LL II.203
20. LL I.237,264
21. LL I.231
22. LL I.239
23. Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, (Nelson & Sons, London) pp.89-90
24. Brontë, *The Professor*, p.95
25. J. Wolffe, 'Evangelicalism in mid-nineteenth-century England', *Evangelicals, Women and Community*, p.222
26. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.413
27. Daniel 3: 19-24
28. Ephesians 2: 8-9
29. LL I.270
30. LL II.219
31. R.V.B. Volume I Traditions ed. G. Parsons (Milton Keynes 1988) p.73
32. LL I.330
33. John Wolffe, 'Evangelicalism in mid-nineteenth-century England', *Evangelicals, Women and Community*, p.224
34. John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1829-60* (Oxford 1991) p.12
35. Cited in John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, p.3

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

In attempting to investigate how Charlotte Brontë's novels reflect her opinions and her beliefs we are on controversial ground. Whether it is sound critical practice is a debateable point. How far is the creative imagination taking over? How far is the writer's memory distorted by subsequent experiences? Then again, how far is that creative imagination consciously and deliberately changing and reassembling those experiences to produce the desired result? Elisabeth Jay maintains that the author's opinions should "illuminate" the drama of the action of the novel, and not attempt "to replace that drama".¹ So we must be cautious in implying that Charlotte Brontë's ideas are those of her characters.

There is no doubt, for example, that the passionate experiences of her early years must have gone into the formation of the little Jane Eyre. The child's sense of helplessness before the power of the grown ups when fear overwhelms and half-heard stories take hold of a vivid imagination; those make powerful reading :-

I heard the rain still beating continuously on the staircase window, and the wind howling in the grove behind the hall; I grew, by degrees, cold as a stone..... All said I was wicked and perhaps I might be so (JE p.14).

Perhaps she would starve to death - death makes her think of the vault where Mr Reed lies buried. So when the flickering light "gleamed on the wall", her mind was prepared for horror :-

ear, eye, and mind were alike strained to dread; such dread as children only can feel (JE p.11).

Certainly Charlotte Brontë realises how the intensity of a child's feelings can "illuminate" the situation. And so often a child is haunted by a strange sense of guilt, unexplained but real, which can intensify haunting images.

But what of the man-woman relationship - so central to the "drama" of the novels, and so central to Charlotte Brontë's own personal "drama"? It is easy to find what one is looking for: much of modern criticism of Charlotte's work centres on her role as a woman-writer, an exponent of the special and distinctive thoughts, feelings and reactions that colour feminine response. And inevitably there is a distinction; people and events are coloured by one's gender, just as they are by one's upbringing, education, social and cultural background. The nineteenth-century critics saw the distinction in black and white. Southey was the arch-offender in this; in his discouraging reply to Charlotte Brontë's letter he writes: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be".² As she later made clear to G. H. Lewes, she wished to be judged as an author and not as a woman. She wanted her work to be valued on its own merit. She sought neither the condescending kindness of some, nor the over-critical gaze of others. This stand was to be taken up with far more force by George Eliot. Charlotte herself seemed to feel that if in the struggle she enhanced the position of women - all well and good. But it was not what she was specifically setting out to do.

Opposition, criticism, difficulty and tribulation, the Brontë household had all faced from the beginning. And they must have been well nurtured in their fight against such opposition by their Evangelical upbringing. "Expect contradiction, opposition, together with crosses of various kinds", wrote John Wesley in his *A Plain Account of Christian*

Perfection (1741), "The best helps to growth in grace are the ill-usage, the affronts, and the losses which befall us".³

This idea of the resilience called for in response to the blows life deals us is the theme of an article on 'Rejection' by Thomas Loe. He points out significantly that "Not only is Jane Eyre rejected, but she does some 'rejecting' ". She makes three important choices in her life. The first was to stay on at Lowood, for she knows she needs to gain the means of financial independence - a need for which Charlotte Brontë and her sisters were constantly aware. The second choice was when she leaves Mr Rochester after his disclosure at the abortive wedding ceremony that he is already married. Then she learns :-

to temper her passion and resist his physical appeal with a balanced response..... Jane rejects Rochester - not because she is afraid of social disapproval, but because she realizes it will lock her into static definition alongside those of his other mistresses whom he now despises.⁴

Even stronger is her certainty, that in spite of the grief she is inflicting on him and the bitter sorrow in her own heart, to take any other course would be wrong.

There still follows much heart-searching. We find Jane asking herself :-

Who in the world cares for you? Or who will be injured by what you do?

But she finally gives herself the firm answer :-

I care for myself..... Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation; they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour (JE p.404).

By far the most complex of her choices is her rejection of St John Rivers, because it

"tests the moral and intellectual principles closest to her character..... St John offers..... a genuine dedication to altruism". His plea is based on an objective approach to duty; Jane almost succumbs because his offer would give her a chance to fashion her life in terms of a clearly defined principle. But whereas to yield to Rochester would be an "error of principle", to yield to St John would be an "error of judgment" (JE p.534).

Loe points out that this rejection of :-

untenable choices seems particularly important because it reflects not only Charlotte Brontë's vision of the lack of power and the impossibility of individualism defining the real situations of many Victorian women, but also her resilient optimism about developing the strength of character necessary for overcoming such situations.⁵

She needed such resilience in her own situation as a governess, for we know from her letters and novels that in this situation she was deeply unhappy. Her nature did not have the necessary tractability and adaptability to enable her to settle into the very ambiguous position in which governesses found themselves. There were others of her generation - such as Harriet Martineau, George Eliot and Barbara Bodichon who fought against the concept of woman as the "Angel in the House". This more conventional image certainly received a blessing in high places. The Queen herself was pictured as the perfect "hausfrau". Mary Sumner was soon to gather the Mothers of the Church of England into the Mothers' Union with stress on the dutiful caring role of the mother in the home. But social problems still reared their heads. Mrs Gaskell created a furore by dealing with the question of the unmarried mother in *Ruth* (1853). Charlotte Brontë, meanwhile, was working out the "woman" situation for herself in *Shirley*. Caroline is not such a strong or deeply-felt character as Jane Eyre, but she

resents her subordinate position and challenges Robert Moore to give her an opportunity to use her powers. She resents, too, her uncle's treatment of her as a pretty plaything. Even Jane in her unenviable subordination to the overbearing Ingrams is at least "her own woman"; and such independence is finally a source of great personal satisfaction to Lucy Snowe in her own little school.

This challenging of the conventional romantic woman-figure makes it interesting to compare two articles published by the *Brontë Society Transactions*; one in 1927 by J. Baillie⁶ and one in 1946 by Barbara Ward.⁷ Baillie maintains that though religious life in England at this time was "re-awakened in all its varied sects and forms" and though the Brontë household were kept up-to-date with this ferment through newspapers and periodicals, yet they would appear to show "a complete indifference to the tendencies and influences which were creating a new spirit in the religious life of England". Barbara Ward, on the other hand, comments positively on the reaction of the members of the Brontë household to the religious fervour in Britain. And not only to matters religious but to all the trends that so absorbed people in 1846 - for according to Ward, that year was a watershed. Marx was working on his *Communist Manifesto*; the Corn Laws had been repealed; there was agitation against bad housing; Chartist agitation was at its most vigorous. Railway mania raged through England. And even the Brontë girls could not have failed to notice that as they made their valiant expeditions to London!

And it was a time, as Barbara Ward points out, of great intellectual ferment in many areas. Taking into account Charlotte Brontë's inquiring mind and her expanding circle

of acquaintances, it is hard to believe she was not finding the new thinking on scientific subjects of interest. Pre-Darwinian principles were surfacing in the strange areas of phrenology and physiognomy. They had achieved a semi-scientific status, and Charlotte Brontë used them repeatedly in describing her characters. She even uses the jargon of phrenology, talking of the "organ" of Veneration and the organs of Benevolence for example. If she had not been prepared to take the study of phrenology seriously, she would not have allowed herself to be persuaded to visit a phrenologist while she was staying in London in 1851.⁸ But whether this new system "of mental philosophy" added anything to her power of "analysing the motives of human conduct" is doubtful.

The furore occasioned by D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus* - translated by George Eliot - was bringing the controversy of scientific methods into Biblical Scholarship. There was consternation in clerical circles. It is hard to believe Charlotte Brontë was unaware of all this.

Therefore to return to the two articles by Baillie and Ward; to say with Baillie that the tenor of Charlotte Brontë's mental life was not affected by the religious ferment of her day is to miss the underlying assumptions of her whole thinking. Rather would we agree with Barbara Ward that religious and moral convictions are so woven into the characters and actions of her novels as to be basic to the whole structure. "Her final standard of judgment is always a standard of good and bad". If she does not mirror her time it is because "her voice goes beyond it..... she transcends the society in which she lived, through the sheer power of her imagination".⁹

What then do her novels reveal of the nineteenth-century religious scene? Basic Evangelical theology for one thing: the fall of man, man's inability of himself to help himself, the atoning death of Christ, the work of grace in the heart of man, his justification by faith and possibility of new birth. All these seem implicit in what she wrote; they may not be mentioned in specific terms, but permeate her more intimate outpourings, particularly in her letters. The moral assumptions that follow for the true Evangelical - other-worldliness, the present world as a preparation for eternity, the importance of duty, self-discipline, concern for others - these were the assumptions that motivate the chief characters in her novels. This was her inheritance from her Anglican Evangelical and Wesleyan Methodist upbringing. The typical Evangelical could be narrow-minded yet surprisingly tolerant. This Charlotte Brontë exemplified. She could conceive of loving Roman Catholics - as Lucy loved Paul Emmanuel - but maintained a strong antagonism to Catholicism. She herself loved Mr Nicholls, but remained an anti-Puseyite. Undoubtedly as time went on the narrow-mindedness gave way to tolerance. As Rosemary Harthill reminds us, when she was accused by her critics of an ungodly discontent with the social order, she asserted :-

conventionality is not morality..... self-righteousness is
not religion.¹⁰

Michael Wheeler in his study *Death and the Future Life*, maintains that the Broad Church point of view was in fact anticipated in several novels of the time. To support this, he reminds us that Charlotte Brontë is reported to have described the damnatory clauses in the Athanasian creed as "profane"; a move towards liberalism that would

still have been considered heretical by many.¹¹

She would never have entered Emily's visionary world, nor so entirely ignored convention as it was in Emily's nature to do. But she recognised the vision when she saw it in Emily's poems in 1846 and in Emily's dying which caused her much heartache and puzzlement in 1848. She was acutely aware of that other visionary world even if she could not share it, nor enter it. Nor, on the other hand, was she as orthodox as Anne, whose ability to conform probably gave her the strength to endure her four years with the Robinsons, to wrestle with moral problems in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and to die with quiet assurance of a future life, so that in death she could turn to her grieving sister and say: "Have courage, Charlotte, have courage".

While her nature, her upbringing and the times in which she lived all contributed to the strength of her Protestant convictions, the romantic in her nature, which made her love John Martin's paintings, Byron's poetry, Rachel's acting, could easily have come to find some recognition of the glory of the Mass. She may have despised herself for her weakness in seeking the confessional in Brussels, but there was an inner side of her that was in need of the reassurance given. And later in her life, did she not go twice to hear Cardinal Wiseman and to attend John Henry Newman's lectures? Rosemary Harthill suggests that her depiction of Madame Beck, the figure of the Nun, and Lucy falling in love with a Roman Catholic really reveal Charlotte Brontë laughing not only at the extravagance of Catholicism, but also at the extravagances of anti-Catholicism; the sort of anti-Catholic writing that, taken to extremes, could give you *The Female Jesuit* and *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*.

Publication of a book was for Charlotte Brontë "a solemn act of conscience". True artistic creation resulted from divine inspiration. So she told Mrs Gaskell that she thought about things of which she had no experience before falling asleep, and woke with things clear in her mind. As she says in her 'Preface' to *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1850 :-

The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master.

It was this fight for the right to express all her feelings, and the intensity of a woman's feelings, that so shocked and offended her critics

Joan Chard takes up the challenge of the words of Milton which Jane Eyre uses to St John Rivers :-

"The very name of love is an apple of discord"(JE p.522).

Milton had seen the relationships between the sexes as based on the dominance of the male. Charlotte Brontë contends that the Eden Myth is "descriptive" not "prescriptive"; the dominance "aberrant" rather than "normative". Charlotte Brontë's heroines are "seekers after knowledge and takers of risks". Their desire is always for relationships" which are not conforming but rather transforming".¹²

So Lucy and Paul Emmanuel can come to their perfect accord. He can say :-

"Remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan.
I love Protestantism in you."

And she can feel :-

All Rome could not put into him bigotry..... he
was born honest and not false (V.pp.712-714).

For Charlotte Brontë's characters understand that their spiritual pilgrimage has to be "not with possession but with process, not with attainment, but with expectation".¹³

So, to sum up, Wesleyan Methodism was certainly reflected in Charlotte Brontë's writing. Even while she scoffed at its extravagances, she inherited many of its convictions. But chiefly was that so because of its close association with the strain of Evangelicalism which was Patrick Brontë's, and because of the profound influence of Patrick himself on his daughter. Added to this was the co-incidence of family connections and friends, and the especial place of Haworth in Methodist history. This same background was used with different emphasis by Emily and Anne. For Charlotte, it became part of her passionately independent turn of mind. Jane Eyre's angry rejection of the Reverend Mr Brocklehurst's hypocrisy and cruelty may hold all the exaggeration of caricature used by a novelist for literary effect, but whether autobiographically true or not, it has all the absolute truth of a child suffering from a burning sense of injustice and fighting angrily against it. And throughout her life and writing Charlotte Brontë maintained this independent spirit. Nothing was accepted without first passing a personal judgment on it. Her own questioning mind selected and approved because essentially she was a "Protestant" and a "non-conformist", in the broadest sense of the word.

It is possible to establish an argument, as Bossy does, for describing Roman Catholicism also as a non-conforming element in the nineteenth-century.¹⁴ But as such it would have been rejected, as a way of salvation, by Charlotte Brontë, because her unbending individualism could not have come to terms with the constraints imposed by an authoritarian church.

But even that was not the most powerful force accounting for her strong anti-Catholic feelings. For that we must look at her father's inherent anti-Catholicism. Then added to that the tide of religious thinking of the day, which in some quarters was virulent in its anti-Catholicism.

It is difficult for us in our multi-cultural and multi-media society to appreciate the intense power of concentrated opinion upon closed societies. Many of us could find personal instances such as David Butler quotes in his conclusion to his new work. His uncle "from the depths of his two-inch clerical collar", on being told that his nephew had been in Rome looking at the theology of the two Vatican councils, spat out: "Ugh, Papists!"¹⁵ Today, because we claim to accept everything, perhaps, in the end we believe nothing firmly and convincingly. If Charlotte Brontë questioned and discarded, it was from a firm base of conviction and certainty.

So if Methodism and Catholicism played a substantial role in Charlotte Brontë's mental and spiritual progress, and therefore a large part in the motives and actions of her characters, they were just one vital element in the growth of the whole person who was struggling for definition within that tiny woman's body.

Chapter Seven - Conclusion

1. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, p.5
2. Cited in W. Gerin, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.110
3. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, pp.106-9
4. Thomas Loe, 'Rejection and Progress in *Jane Eyre*', BST.19. 8 (1989) p.358
5. Loe, 'Rejection', p.360
6. J. B. Baillie, 'Religion and the Brontës', BST.7 (1927) p.60
7. Barbara Ward, 'Charlotte Brontë and the World of 1846', BST.11.5 (1946) p.3
8. Ian Jack, 'Phrenology, Physiognomy and Characterisation in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë', BST.15.5 (1970) pp.388-390
9. Ward, 'Charlotte Brontë and the world of 1846', pp.8-13
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11. Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life*, p.194
12. M. Joan Chard, 'Apple of Discord'. Centrality of the Eden Myth in Charlotte Brontë's Novels, BST. 19.5 (1988) p.202
13. Chard, 'Apple of Discord', p.204
14. JB p.7
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